

*The Artist in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison*

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- abstract -

The current project, *The Artist in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison*, deserves a special place among the numerous critical studies on Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison as it offers a different perspective, that of reading Woolf's work together with Morrison's.

Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison are leading literary and cultural voices – one an British novelist and short story writer, essayist and publisher, regarded as a top modernist literary figure of the twentieth century and the other a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, professor, and editor. Given their numerous achievements, to write about Virginia Woolf or Toni Morrison is an endless endeavour. Nevertheless, I have taken up the challenge of writing about Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, with the view of establishing connections between their works.

The aim is to find points of resemblance or difference between the ways these two writers chose to write about the artist and his /her mission. I approach the topic being fully aware that a comparison between Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison - writers separated through time, race, nationality - might seem odd, at least, in the beginning.

However, this type of investigation is not completely new. The two were brought together for the first time by Barbara Christian, a professor of African American Studies at The University of California, Berkley. She extensively discussed Morrison's interest in Woolf's work, referring to Morrison's graduate thesis *The Treatment of the Alienated in Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner*. She used the term "layered rhythms" to talk about Woolf's and Morrison's "different, yet related, projects", that is their endeavour of writing about isolation and alienation.

A more complex analysis of these two writers has been performed by Lisa Williams; her work, *The Artist as An Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf*, published in 2000 is mainly structured on some parallelisms: *The Voyage Out* vs. *The Bluest Eye*, *Mrs. Dalloway* vs. *Sula* and *To the Lighthouse* vs. *Beloved*. Of the three comparisons proposed by Lisa Williams, the one I completely agree with is that between *Mrs. Dalloway* and *Sula*, whereas the one between *Beloved* and *To the Lighthouse* is, in my opinion too far-fetched. Williams' comparison of *Beloved* with *To the Lighthouse* is based on what she refers to as "these writers' belief that the act of memory is always central to the act of healing."

However, I do not consider that Sethe can be the same type of artist as Mrs. Ramsay is. As a matter of fact, Williams uses the term “artist” too generally, without offering any clarifications in the form of different typologies.

Thus, the thesis *The Artist in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison* somehow fills a certain gap that exists when analyzing the two writers from views on the topic, i.e. the depiction of the artist in their novels. I consider that its originality lies in presenting the portraits of the artists alongside with “background” information, placing them in a broader perspective. Moreover, I also examine both Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison as artists shaped by the society of their time, discussing their literary activity as politically involved.

The thesis is structured in two parts; Part I: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison: Reality vs. Fiction and Part II: Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison: Common Typologies. The first part attempts at portraying the cultural environment in which the two evolved as writers. Also, it establishes the historical and socio-political background in which Woolf’s artists live and create; it represents the foundation that can be identified in the case of any artist, determining his/her artistic destiny. The same dimensions are analyzed in the work of Toni Morrison, but, if in Virginia Woolf’s case I deal with only three of her novels - *The Voyage Out*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves* - the discussion in Morrison’s case is extended as to cover all her novels, pointing out her gradual understanding of the African American history.

In my opinion, both Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison employ their novels as vehicles to incite action. They are, in fact, social and political treatises, striving to make readers active participants. Both writers use their novels as tools to politically educate readers about the existing oppressive systems. However, what I find different in these projects is the fact that Morrison’s fiction is highly influenced by the African American twist on modernism. Morrison’s vision is more social or communal than Woolf’s, which is an individualistic, “European”, modernist one.

Moreover, in the first part of the thesis I also assess the major differences between Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. I think this is imperative because, in this way, I establish a certain framework for the discussion of their works. Thus, what I consider to be the major difference between Woolf and Morrison is represented by their distinct feminist voices. The chapter Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison: Distinct Feminist Voices analyses the way they build literary forms in order to present women, in the case of Woolf and women and race, in that of Morrison. While Virginia Woolf attempted to achieve a distinctively female discourse,

Toni Morrison proposes a language of liberation, in which the questions of race are answered with the help of the community.

I dare say these theories somehow limit the interpretations of Woolf's and Morrison's work. Our discussion of Woolf's work is based on the fact that, challenging the linear Western structure, her style emerges as an integral component of her mind, body, writing and life. Furthermore, her theory of style, her vision of a "woman's sentence" opens for us a new way of viewing women writings, and, consequently, new paths for women writers to follow in their artistic endeavours.

As for any discussion of Morrison's work, it starts with recognizing the fact that she tries to create a place for African Americans, within the very language that continually repressed them. In order to achieve this, the narrator does not use a single, integrative, and authoritative voice, but different voices of the members of the community, incorporating in the novel the aural-oral and participatory dynamics of African American culture. Morrison struggles to create an "black" mode of writing which resembles the idioms of black communities, and also, women's conversations with one another, attaining a "conspiratorial" inflexion, a feminine subtext.

My approach stands within the generally accepted reading of those writers: Woolf – a woman writer - and Morrison - "writer who is black and a woman"-, as the author defines herself. The novelty consists in analyzing these two writers together, interpreting the artist figures created in their novels. I propose a comparison in terms of the common typologies of the artist. Consequently, I analyse the writer, the painter, the musician, and the artist with no art form. There are many similarities between Woolf and Morrison in the portrayal of the writer and also of the artist with no art form; in fact, when discussing the latter, we deal with the same use of pairings in both Woolf's and Morrison's novels: Clarissa and Sally vs. Sula and Nel, Clarissa and Septimus vs. Sula and Shadrack. The differences however appear when outlining the painter and the musician in the works of the two writers because in the case of Morrison, who presents a communal use of music and painting we are unable to single out musicians, or painters.

### *The Writer*

The comments in this chapter focus on two novels: Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*; besides analysing Bernard and Claudia, the writers envisioned by Woolf and Morrison, I also assess the role ascribed to language. In the case of

Woolf, we deal with elusive language, and in Morrison's case, with the orality of African American language.

Woolf's writer never translates his vision into a work of art; Bernard, the writer in *The Waves*, is so overwhelmed by the meaningless, chaotic nature of life that his vision of the whole comes too late for him to transform it into a work of art. Writing seems to Virginia Woolf more difficult than painting; the right words, the perfect phrase were almost impossible to grasp. Her writer dreads the "appalling moment" when the sequence of narrative fails: there is always a moment in Bernard's stories where he is unable to continue. He is an incomplete artist, since he cannot produce art. From this point of view, he is different from Morrison's writer.

Unlike Bernard, who might be called a "passive" writer, one who is unable to create, Claudia, the writer/teller in *The Bluest Eye* is an "active" one, because she chooses to tell the untold-till-then-story and also, because she demands her readers' reaction. Claudia is a survivor of this tragedy because she benefits from the strong ties with her mother; she communicates with her mother and their relationship is based on old, African values. Unlike her, Bernard has no tradition to rely on; he rejects the authority of tradition, and this leads him to fragmentation: his story is not complete; in fact it is made of fragments that he is incapable of putting together.

Claudia is part of the black tradition and this gives her the strength she needed to tell the story. In the end Claudia is the only one who survives the tragedy both physically and psychologically because she has found a creative way of using language. Like Bernard, she is aware of the elusive nature of the language, of its destructive character, but she manages to *tell* the story, to be a true artist. Bernard fails because the story he chooses to *write* is not his story, but different fragments of multiple stories. He couldn't find his true artistic voice.

Woolf's writer cannot escape the troubling present. Rejecting his past, he loses roots, traditions and, consequently, he is adrift in the modern world. He is unable to grasp the perfect language because he is always looking for complexity instead of simplicity. His tragedy, after all, is the fact that he has to confront life alone. Morrison's writer is surrounded by an entire community; she is deeply rooted in an African American tradition and, as a result, she becomes the voice of the community. Her fate is decided within and by this community; that's why for her, there is a way out because her strength derives from the power of her people.

*The painter*

The next chapter introduces the painter as he/she was imagined by Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison. A point to point comparison is hardly possible here, since the portraits are more different than alike.

Lily Briscoe, the painter in *To the Lighthouse* represents Woolf's ideal artist, who mingles "masculine" rationality with "feminine" sympathy. She has no long-established tradition of women artists in which to find solace and guidance. In trying to live by herself and for herself, Lily is going against the cultural traditions of the previous generation. Thus, she can be seen as Woolf's original approach to resolve the Victorian versus modernist conflict concerning the woman artist's status. She responds to the Victorian stereotype that "women can't paint, women can't write" not with frustration and anger, but with art. Her project is not meant to failure because it is not grounded on language. In the end, Lily becomes a complete artist because, unlike Bernard, she has her vision and, more importantly, she can put her vision on canvas.

The next section, The Painter in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* offers a new interpretation to painting, as a means of mourning, and also analyzes the way Toni Morrison is painting the paradise. The focus is on the Utopian efforts of both African Americans to construct spaces free of white racialized violence and discrimination and of African American women to construct spaces free of male domination and patriarchy, where they could express their self and have their own desires. Moreover, the investigation emphasizes the warning given by Morrison: fighting for equality can be repressive.

My approach interprets the bereavement ritual in *Paradise* as enabling the Convent women to begin mourning, a process through which they gradually turn themselves into artists, women artists. Their creative process is, unlike that experienced by Lily Briscoe, one in which all the artists have their part, all of them representing different facets of the folk artist.

Painting for Woolf and Morrison represents a healing process, the artist undergoing a spiritual transformation. Through painting, the artist can achieve a better "look" at the troubling, haunting past; somehow the artist is in the position of looking from a different perspective, of getting a certain objectivity needed to overcome his/her traumas.

In the case of Morrison, the painter's work must be seen only from a collective point of view since art cannot be produced individually. It is true that each painting has a different story, based on the life of its artists and that the artistic work is born out of personal experience, representing a personal understanding of the world. However, for their works of art to be created, they need the support of the community.

Morrison's vision of the painter ends in death. If in the portrayal of the writer, Virginia Woolf's approach was pessimistic and Morrison's was optimistic, it is the opposite here. Morrison's paradise fails to protect women within culture. Despite the fact that the women artists get to their souls and accept the past through painting, the creative process takes place in an artificial "paradise"; men represent the enemy, there is no reconciliation between them and the Covent women. From this point of view, they are different from Lily, who has come to accept Mr. Ramsay, to not see him as an enemy.

### *The musician*

In the next chapter: The Musician in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison, I focus on the musician's place and role in *The Voyage Out* and *Jazz*. Music and the musician play important roles in the novels' plot and structure and can be considered the keys to their understanding and analysis.

Virginia Woolf's and Toni Morrison's portraits of the musician are different: for Woolf the musician is an artist in confrontation with her own society, for Morrison, it is an entire community that represents the musician and, also the whole world of music - jazz. It is impossible for us to identify musicians as individual characters in *Jazz*. Instead, we are introduced to a world where music is a way of living, of understanding ourselves as individuals.

Analyzing the role music plays in the works of Woolf and Morrison, we have reached the conclusion that, for both writers, music is equated with a mode of living.

For Rachel, the artist in *The Voyage Out*, music represents a form of transcendence, enabling her to move beyond self-consciousness and the external reality that surrounds her. Rachel's reluctance to accommodate herself to the everyday world of men and women is accomplished through music. Rachel's music serves a number of important functions for her. She turns to the piano when she feels rebuffed by others. Playing music allows her to gain control over her emotions in following the notation of the score. Furthermore, when she plays, Rachel exercises her unusual talent, reaffirming her individuality and uniqueness in the process, particularly after having been ignored or rejected by others.

In *Jazz*, music participates in the healing process several of the characters undergo. Jazz was considered a musical revelation, a religion, a philosophy of the world. However, as in the case of the other artists portrayed by Morrison, this form of art is communal. Coming together in a communal sharing of personal experiences, often through the medium of music, is healing for both the black individual and the black community. She feels that a novel

should include this important element of black tradition and, consequently, her work is in many ways an extension of the songs, as well as a testimony to the black experience.

And yet, both Woolf and Morrison speak of the impossibility of music to represent the only salvation for their characters. That is why, both writers strongly believe that the novel also has a strong cultural importance for in many ways, it replaces the music and the painting which no longer express the complexity of human life. Music and painting play their part, but in the end the novel has the mission of depicting the human life with all its joys and sorrows; it is a complex and complete form of art. Woolf and Morrison do not stultify the role music and painting play in our lives; as writers they believe more in the power of language to depict reality.

*The artist with no art form*

This last typology analyzed in this paper offers the closest comparison between the two writers. The chapter focuses on Clarissa Dalloway, the protagonist of *Mrs. Dalloway* and Sula Peace, of *Sula*, and also, offers a commentary on the pairings used by both Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison.

Traditionally speaking, Clarissa doesn't create any art; she cannot paint, write, or play music. And yet, she is an artist, a social one, whose mission is to bring light to life.

The same non traditional art form is to be found in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The protagonist searches for a place of her own; because she is looking for a new, different, untraditional way of living her life, she doesn't have the support of her collectivity. For the first time in Morrison's work the individual, the African American woman, is placed against her society; and without its support, there is no possible ending but death.

Regarding the above mentioned pairings, although the characters forming them are not all artists, the paper includes them in a subchapter, Doubled Characters, since they help in the assertion of the creative selves. The couple Clarissa Dalloway – Sally Seton resembles that created by Toni Morrison, Sula and Nel, and the couple Clarissa – Warren Smith resembles Sula – Shadrack. However, the friendship between the latter does not have the homoeroticism that exists between the former. My analysis is directed towards the importance of female bonding in both Woolf's and Morrison's work and its central connection to their creative vision. I do not discuss *Mrs. Dalloway* or *Sula* as “lesbian novels.”

What both Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison seem to express through this type of artists is that there is art in most of us and, yet, many of us are not aware of it. They equate art with some ordinary activities present in the lives of many of us. For example, for Woolf, party-giving is viewed as a social form of art and is compared to writing; the process of

writing without the fear of praise and censure resembles the happy moment when the party was over. For Woolf, the party becomes an “arena” where she can debate with other intellectuals, a means to lift her gloom and observe life while still slipping in and out of it. The party represents “a script she can create”<sup>1</sup>, a place where she can assert her integrity as an artist and intellectual.

Sula, Clarissa’s counterpart created by Morrison, is an artist in that she causes people to react; she causes the people of Bottom to unify, even though temporarily, and she also injects them with a dose of defiance, resistance, and aggressiveness.

Moreover, we can say that her nonconformist form of art is derived from a lack of tradition. Toni Morrison herself thinks of Sula as this type of artist: “Had she paints, or clays, or knew the discipline of dance or strings; had she anything to engage her tremendous curiosity and her gift for metaphor, she might have exchanged the restlessness and preoccupation with whim for an activity that provided her with all she yearned for. And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous.”<sup>2</sup>

Though unable to find an art form, both Clarissa and Sula are creative women, but their works are directed towards people and that makes them ephemeral. Nobody can see or hear or touch their “works of art”, we can only “sense” them for a few moments until they disappear. This is as much to say that society annihilates their artistic desires and they only find rebuffs: party-giving or men-matching.

Consequently, Sula’s death proves how difficult it is for a black female artist to dare to rebel and survive. Likewise, Woolf emphasizes how difficult it is for the female artist to create when she doesn’t have the same training and education as men. Clarissa, like Rachel Vinrace, has had no formal education because of her gender. Had her artistic impulses been analyzed and trained properly, she could have become a painter, a writer, a musician. In view of such circumstances, both Woolf and Morrison associate their characters’ isolation with being excluded from dominant discourses.

As far as the pairings are concerned, it is obvious that Morrison and Woolf often double their artist figures with characters who are either silent or mad, characters who speak a fragmented and traumatized language that the artist must translate into a creative form.

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Septimus’s language is associated with the destruction of war, echoing the pain of Clarissa's inability to choose a life with women outside the traditional

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Williams, *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2000, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 121.



constraints of marriage. Shadrack, of *Sula*, like Septimus, represents a consciousness torn apart by war. Yet, unlike Septimus who chooses suicide, an individualistic act, Shadrack retains a collective possibility for action, i.e. National Suicide Day; unlike Septimus, he protests collectively.

The two-part structure of this thesis requires a similar way of concluding. Thus, in the first part of the conclusions, Literature – A Political Weapon, I assess Virginia Woolf's and Toni Morrison's use of language for political purposes, whereas in the second part, Different Facets of the Artist, I offer a commentary on the portraits of the artist made by these two writers.

I think that both Woolf and Morrison have confidence in the revolutionary potential of language; Woolf asserts that the textual, the cultural and the psychological are so interconnected that words have political implications, whereas Morrison advocates for a language that can free people out of their enclosed systems. Her work demonstrates that confronting the past, speaking about it is liberating. I can say that the two writers choose to deal with the silence regarding women and African American women, respectively, transforming it into a protest against assimilationist tendencies.

To conclude, Virginia Woolf and Toni Morrison consider the severe obstacles the female artist must encounter and overcome before she can create art. However, Morrison redefined Woolf's concept of isolation, bringing a new dimension to the above mentioned theme of isolation, i.e. American racism. While Morrison's female characters are clearly outsiders, they can nevertheless experience a sense of community that Woolf's characters cannot. Woolf's female characters, on the other hand, are often alienated because of their repressed erotic longing for women.

Both Woolf and Morrison define the female self as one in process, without rigid boundaries, and constantly in a process of becoming. At the same time, Morrison and Woolf criticize the ways a linear, static language has been used to justify both violence and domination as they posit the healing power of story and narrative against the exclusionary discourse of racist, sexist language. Through their characters and the narrative strategies used the two writers urge the artist to reject traditional, selfless, and self-hating ways of being.

Rooted within a distinctly African-American oral tradition, Morrison creates characters, who, while alienated, can also find acceptance and solace within the surrounding African-American community. Woolf's characters, on the other hand, are usually completely alone, without any type of community or often even friends. That is why we can say that Woolf's vision is ultimately pessimistic; she sees the future as inexplicably bleak and her

effort is to bring about reconciliation with the immediate condition. Morrison's novels, on the other hand, record the inexplicable brutality of slavery, for example, as well as the destructive consequences of both internalized and externalized racism; her vision, in sharp contrast to Woolf's, is nonetheless hopeful. For Morrison, writing is an act of defiance that heals the state of invisibility since what has remained unseen is finally expressed through language.