

‘I Wonder What Made Me Think You Were Different’

A Relevance-Theoretic Account for an Interpretation of ‘Recitatif’ by Toni Morrison

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Abstract

The asymmetry between text’s meaning and writer’s meaning is gapped within Relevance-theoretic account by two complementary processes (encoding/decoding and ostensive/inferential process). Guided by expectations and the presumptions of optimal relevance, readers must enrich the decoded meaning at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level by supplying contextual assumptions to make the whole experience relevant. Three subtasks are required: disambiguation, referent assignment, and enrichment (Uchida 1998), following a path which is the most economical. In order to challenge this theoretical framework, I have chosen Toni Morrison’s only published short story ‘Recitatif’ (1983), where the two main characters, Twyla and Roberta, from different races, cross paths over many years since their meeting at a youth shelter. Despite the fact that the majority of critics have focused on the topic of race, I intend to prove that there are elements to analyze the topic of childhood trauma. Three episodes are studied in detail: Twyla and Roberta’s mothers visiting the Orphanage, the incident with Maggie and, finally, the protest during the busing issue opens up the interpretation of *Recitatif* as a short story of childhood trauma

Keywords: ‘Recitatif’, Toni Morrison, Relevance Theory, cognitive and poetic effects, inference process.

1. Introduction

This paper examines interrelated issues at the crossroads of pragmatic literary stylistics (Chapman & Clark, 2014) from the point of view of Relevance Theory (henceforth, RT). Moreover, it aims to offer a framework for the reading, interpretation and evaluation of ‘Recitatif’ (1983), Toni Morrison’s only published short story.

For three decades, this short story has been analyzed and critiqued. Studies show how there has been an expansion of its interpretation from the social relevance of the topic of race (Toni Morrison, 1992; Abel, 1993; Goldstein-Shirley, 1996, 1997; Harris, 2006; Knoflíčková, 2011; Li-Li, 2011; Benjamin, 2013; Kolehmainen, 2013 Kim, 2015; Delazari, 2016) to those who approach the topics of race and disability together (Sklar, 2011, Stanley, 2011; Phelan, 2015); to, finally, those who tackle the main characters’ conflicted memories (Androne, 2007; Kusumoto, 2008). However, I was not able to discover any studies relating to childhood trauma, a theme that Morrison had covered in previous and subsequent works to *Recitatif*.

The present study seeks to develop this area further by addressing two principal aims:

- (i) To assess the contribution that RT can make to the study of fictional narrative short stories
- (ii) To assess the value of RT to the critical evaluation and interpretation of *Recitatif* as a story of childhood trauma.

In order to address these two interconnected aims, the paper will be structured in the following way. The second section will offer a brief outline of the principal inferential processes described by RT. In the third section, a basic presentation of the role of the genre short story will be outlined. In the fourth section a brief application of the main cognitive principles and operations will be applied to *Recitatif*; and in the final section, the conclusions of our study are offered.

2 The inferential process

The distance between the meaning of a text and the intended writer's meaning is gapped within the Relevance-Theoretic account by two complementary processes: encoding/decoding and ostensive/inferential process. Guided by expectations and the presumptions of optimal relevance, readers must enrich the decoded meaning at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level by supplying contextual assumptions to make the whole experience relevant.

So, in this inferential process two operations are implicated: obtaining explicatures and implicatures. Sperber and Wilson understand explicature as 'a combination of linguistically encoded and contextually inferred conceptual features' (1995:182). To do so, three subtasks are required: disambiguation, referent assignment, and enrichment (Uchida 1998; Carston, 2016), following a path which is the most economical. Any other assumption implicitly communicated: it is 'an implicature'. Let's consider this utterance:

- (1) a. Chris left the book by Toni Morrison on his desk in the living-room.
b. Chris left the book on the table.
c. He left it there.
d. On the table

Utterances (1a) - (1d) could be used to communicate explicitly one and the same proposition or assumption. So, in utterance (1c) 'he' is Chris, 'the book' is a book written by Toni Morrison, and 'the table' is the one in the living room, Chris's desk (referents assignment).

For Sperber and Wilson, implicatures come in two sorts: implicated premises and implicated conclusions. Implicated premises are a subset of the contextual assumptions used in processing the utterance and implicated conclusions are a subset of its contextual implications. What characterizes these subsets is that they are communicated (speaker-meant), hence part of the intended interpretation of the utterance. Consider this conversation:

- (2) A: Let's see *Arrival*.
B: Science fiction makes me sleepy.

In the example (2) implicatures are:

- (3) a. 'Arrival' is a science fiction movie (implicated premise).
- b. B thinks that science fiction movies are boring (implicated premise).
- c. B isn't interested in seeing *Arrival* (implicated conclusion).

Having this into account, communication is not a matter of yes or no, but a matter of degree. RT has introduced a distinction between strong and weak communication, where the strength of communication depends on the manifest strength of the speaker's intention to convey a certain implication (D. Wilson, 2011). There is an open debate on how spontaneous or intuitive are the inferences in literary texts in comparison to an everyday conversation (D. Wilson, 2011; A. Furlong 2014; B. Clark, 2014). The point is that the inference process has a cost (following the path of least effort) to maximize the cognitive effects that puts an end to the process. The bigger the effort is, the smaller the reward or the cognitive or contextual effects are. To economize some efforts it makes sense to contemplate in RT a place for the study of genre.

3 A place for genre in RT?

Very little attention has been paid to genre in RT (Goatly, 1994; Unger, 2001, 2006; Rauen, 2009; Ifantidou, 2011, 2014: chapter 3). Goatly (1994) encouraged Neogriceans and postgriceans to incorporate benefits of the sociocultural study of genre, in terms of economical computing or processing efforts. Unger (2001) considers that the study of genre or discourse type can contribute to the development of expectations of relevance in discourse, and the claim that can facilitate the recovery of implicatures in interaction with encyclopaedic (cultural) information. Infantidou (2011) enumerates the benefits of teaching/studying genres to enhance pragmatic competence on two different abilities:

- a) *pragmatic awareness* to identify pragmatically inferred effects in the form of implicated conclusions, e.g. irony, humor, contempt, respect, favouring, or incriminating attitudes conveyed by different text-types; and
- b) *metapragmatic awareness*, the ability to meta-represent and explicate the link between relevant linguistic indexes and pragmatic effects retrieved by readers.

M. Toolan (2009) remarks that genre exists as an institution, as horizons of expectations for readers, models of writing for authors; genres channel the reader's inferences, and help create intelligibility and coherence, and delimit the scope of interpretation.

Due to the limits of this brief presentation, I feel I cannot expand to include the conventions of narrative and particularly of short story narrative to this discussion.

4 Analysis of *Recitatif* by Toni Morrison

The structure of *Recitatif* can be developed as follows:

- (1) In the first part, set in the 1950s at an orphanage, Twyla and Roberta are eight years old and they form a friendship;
- (2) in the second part, set in the 1960s at the Howard Johnson's where Twyla works, they cannot bridge their differences;

- (3) in the third, set in the early 1970s in a suburban shopping center, they are in their late twenties; at first, they effortlessly reconnect but conflicting memories of their time at the orphanage limit their bond;
- (4) in the fourth, set a few months later, they are opposite sides of a picket line outside of a school during the period of desegregation busing;
- (5) and in the fifth, it takes place in a coffee shop. The characters are in their forties and move back toward each other.

In my analysis, I am going to focus merely on three episodes that involve the concept of maternity: Twyla and Roberta's mothers visiting the Orphanage, the incident with Maggie and, finally, the protest during the busing issue.

4.1. Twyla and Roberta's mothers visiting the Orphanage

The first question that arises is why where Twyla and Roberta taken to St. Bonny's? The answer is the enigmatic sentence the short story starts with: 'My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick. That's why we were taken to St. Bonny's' (159)ⁱ. The first implicature is that Twyla and Roberta were neglected by their mothers. As the Figure 1 shows, 11 out of the 16 hits for the lemma *danc** are referred to Twyla's mother.

1	My mother	danced	all night and Roberta's was
2	now and then she would stop	dancing	long enough to tell me some
3	, I said. "She just likes to	dance	all night." "Oh," she no
4	chard where they played radios and	danced	with each other. They'd ligh
5	, I mean. Just the big girls	dancing	and playing the radio. Robe
6	teachers' lounge. I thought if my	dancing	mother met her sick mother
7	a big bang out of a	dancing	one. We got excited about i
8	leave you all alone to go	dancing	. I felt a tap on my
9	watch the big girls smoke and	dance	by the radio. It didn't
10	described in a civics class) there	dancing	in the orchard, the ploppy
11	your mother sick too? No, she	dances	all night. Oh--and an unders
12	to. What do you want? Me	dancing	in that orchard?" "Are
13	. Your mother. Did she ever stop	dancing	?" I shook my head. "No
14	called for help. Maggie was my	dancing	mother. Deaf, I thought, an
15	rtant that you could use. Rocking,	dancing	, swaying as she walked. And
16	My mother, she never did stop	dancing	." "Yes. You told me. A

Figure 1. AntConc 3.4.4 concordance for the lemma danc in Recitatif.*

On the other hand, Roberta's mother was sick. What kind of illness? The answer comes at the end, talking about Maggie, Roberta says: 'I thought she (Maggie) was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too' (174). The explicature is clear: a mental institution. So, Roberta's mother suffered from a kind of mental disorder that neglected her daughter.

Twyla admits that they didn't like each other all that much at first, 'but nobody else wanted to play with us because we weren't real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the

sky' (160). The bond between her and Roberta is built upon the difference between them and other girls at the Orphanage, which derive the weak implicature that the connection between them is their own trauma: being neglected by their mothers. To this connection both character referred later on: 'I wonder what made me think you were different' (171) in the fourth section. Here is a clear case of saturation (different from whom?), supplied by a contextual explicature: different from the rest of girls.

After 28 days in St. Bonny's, on a Sunday, Twyla and Roberta received their mothers. They both were excited by the idea of their mother meeting each other. But, the delusion came all along: first, for Twyla, the way she was dressed inappropriate for the Chapel, but she had a pretty face. Twyla remarks: 'she was the little girl looking for her mother –not me' (162); she destroyed Twyla's basket craft and in front of the big girls called her 'Twyla, baby'. Twyla tells the readers his anger twice: 'I could have killed her' (163).

Then readers attend the meeting between both mothers, but before Twyla describes Roberta's: 'I looked up it seemed for miles. She was big. Bigger than any man and on her chest was the biggest cross I'd ever seen. I swear it was six inches long each way. And in the crook of her arm was the biggest Bible ever made' (163). Curiously, Roberta drank milk from a thermos while her mother read the Bible to her. And the metonymies full of sarcasm are referred to Roberta's mother at the end of the first part: 'The big cross and the big Bible was coming to get her and she seemed sort of glad and sort of not' (164). Of course, Roberta's mother didn't shake Mary's hand.

Before the end of the first part, Twyla thinks out loud: 'I think she (Roberta) was sorry that her mother would not shake my mother's hand. And I liked that and I liked the fact that she didn't say a word about Mary groaning all the way through the service and not bringing any lunch' (164).

In conclusion, the visit of the main character's mother was a disappointment against their initial expectations, one more prove of their abandonment that bonds them together. The kind of trauma that triggers at least Twyla's anger.

4.2. The incident with Maggie

As Figure 2 shows, the lemma *Maggie* produces 14 hits in the story. The first question is who is Maggie? Twyla answer explicitly: 'the kitchen woman' (161). The second question, how was Maggie like? Twyla tells the reader a brief physical description:

'Maggie couldn't talk. The kids said she had her tongue cut out, but I think she was just born that way: mute. She was old and sandy-colored and she worked in the kitchen. I don't know if she was nice or not. I just remember her legs like parentheses and how she rocked when she walked. She worked from early in the morning till two o'clock, and if she was late, if she had too much cleaning and didn't get out till two-fifteen or so, she'd cut through the orchard so she wouldn't miss her bus and have to wait another hour. She wore this really stupid little hat-a kid's hat with ear flaps-and she wasn't much taller than we were. A really awful little hat. Even for a mute, it was dumb-dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all.' (161).

It is curious to notice that Twyla doesn't present any feature of Maggie's character, which leads the discussion to the next question: What happened to Maggie?

1	he radio. Roberta and me watching.	Maggie	fell down there once. The kitchen
2	ls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil.	Maggie	couldn't talk. The kids said she
3	. I think it was the day before	Maggie	fell down that we found out our
4	's is as clear as daylight. Remember	Maggie	? The day she fell down and those
5	from her salad and stared at me. "	Maggie	didn't fall," she said." Yes
6	at orchard?" "Are you sure about	Maggie	?" "Of course I'm sure. You'v
7	. But why can't I remember the	Maggie	thing?" "Believe me. It happ
8	as if I would know her. The	Maggie	thing was troubling me." Cre
9	somehow with that business about	Maggie	. I wouldn't forget a thing like
10	board. What was she saying? Black?	Maggie	wasn't black. "She wasn't bl
11	I was puzzled by her telling me	Maggie	was black. When I thought about i
12	help her and never called for help.	Maggie	was my dancing mother. Deaf, I th
13	. "It's about St. Bonny's and	Maggie	." "Oh, please." "Listen
14	hit, shit. What the hell happened to	Maggie	?" 1983

Figure 2. AntConc 3.4.4 concordance for the lemma Maggie in Recitatif.

The answer to this question is simple at the beginning: ‘Maggie fell down there (in the orchard) once. The kitchen woman with legs like parentheses. And the big girls laughed at her. We should have helped her up, I know, but we were scared of those girls with lipstick and eyebrow pencil’ (161). So, the first conclusion that readers obtain is that Maggie fell down, Twyla and Roberta saw the incident and didn’t help her, because were afraid of the big girls. But this incident triggered Roberta and Twyla’s anger. They started calling her ‘bow legs!’, ‘Dummy!’ (161).

Later, in the third part, memories shift and Roberta adds another detail: Maggie didn’t fall, ‘they (the big girls) pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard’ (169). As an answer to Twyla’s astonishment, Roberta reveals: ‘You have blocked it (that memory), Twyla. It happened’ (169). However, Twyla puts a question that readers should keep in mind: ‘But why can’t I remember the Maggie thing? [...] The Maggie thing was troubling me’ (169).

In the fourth part, the issue appears again, and Roberta declares: ‘and you kicked her (Maggie). We both did. You kicked a black lady who couldn’t even scream (172). At the end of this part, Twyla raise awareness:

‘I tried to reassure myself about the race thing for a long time until it dawned on me that the truth was already there, and Roberta knew it. I didn't kick her; I didn't join in with the gar girls and kick that lady, but I sure did want to. We watched and never tried to help her and never called for help. [...] I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't-just like me and I was glad about that’ (173).

In the last part, Roberta agrees with Twyla’s hidden memory:

‘And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But, well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day-wanting to is doing it." (174-175).

And now, the awareness raises compassion and Roberta cries: ‘Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?’ (175).

My last question is: what meant Maggie for Twyla and Roberta? At the beginning, Maggie was described like the woman who worked in the kitchen. Later, the debate about her race brings a deeper meaning. Twyla affirms in the first part that Maggie was sandy-colored. For Roberta, instead, she was black. Twyla who reveals her meaning of Maggie:

‘Maggie was my dancing mother. Deaf, I thought, and dumb. Nobody inside. Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night. Nobody who could tell you anything important that you could use. Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked. And when the gar girls pushed her down, and started roughhousing, I knew she wouldn’t scream, couldn’t—just like me and I was glad about that’ (173).

Finally, Roberta tells the audience that Maggie was her sick mother: ‘And because she couldn’t talk-well, you know, I thought she was crazy. She’d been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too’ (174).

In conclusion, Twyla and Roberta project in Maggie their childhood trauma: Twyla’s dancing mother (by the way she walked), deaf and mute (she could not tell any piece of advice) and defenseless (she wouldn’t scream); on the other hand, Roberta’s sick mother. Maggie’s situation triggers the main characters’ anger.

4.3. The protest during the busing issue

In the fourth part, during the period of desegregation busing Twyla and Roberta are picketing. They are mothers. Twyla has one son and Roberta has four step kids, because she married a widower. In this context, the discussion between Twyla and Roberta arises to its higher disagreement:

“So what if they go to another school? My boy’s being bussed too, and I don’t mind. Why should you?”

“It’s not about us, Twyla. Me and you. It’s about our kids.”

“What’s more us than that?”.

[...]

Roberta turned around and looked at the women. Almost all of them were standing still now, waiting. Some were even edging toward us. Roberta looked at me out of some refrigerator behind her eyes. “No, they’re not. They’re just mothers.”

“And what am I? Swiss cheese?” (171).

This discussion that is interpreted as a personal attack- that explains the sarcasm- leads to one of the most hilarious scenes in the short story: the crossed messages between Twyla and Roberta during the picketing. The name of the person who hold the banner is indicated between brackets:

[Roberta] MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO

[Twyla] AND SO DO CHILDREN ***

[Roberta] MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO

[Twyla] HOW WOULD YOU KNOW? Readers cannot understand this message unless they recall to their memories: "Four?" / She laughed. "Step kids. He's a widower." ‘

[Twyla] IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?

‘Actually my sign didn't make sense without Roberta's.’

Twyla confesses her failure as a mother during the six weeks classes were suspended:

The children- everybody's children-soon got bored with that extended vacation they thought was going to be so great. They looked at TV until their eyes flattened. I spent a couple of mornings tutoring my son, as the other mothers said we should. Twice I opened a text from last year that he had never turned in. Twice he yawned in my face. Other mothers organized living room sessions so the kids would keep up. None of the kids could concentrate so they drifted back to *The Price Is Right* and *The Brady Bunch*. When the school finally opened there were fights once or twice and some sirens roared through the streets every once in a while. There were a lot of photographers from Albany. And just when ABC was about to send up a news crew, the kids settled down like nothing in the world had happened (173).

5 Conclusions

- a. RT can offer to literary interpretation a framework that helps to recover the writer's meaning, guided by expectations and the presumptions of optimal relevance by enriching the decoded meaning at the explicit level (expliciture) and complementing it at the implicit level (implicature) by supplying contextual assumptions to make the whole experience relevance and get as a reward cognitive effects.
- b. The study of genre offers to the inference process a horizon of expectations for readers, models of writing for authors, and help create intelligibility and coherence, and delimit the scope of interpretation. At the same time, it can help by easing the effort for interpretation.
- c. The analysis of the three chosen episodes: Twyla and Roberta's mothers visiting the Orphanage, the incident with Maggie and, finally, the protest during the busing issue opens up the interpretation of *Recitatif* as a short story of childhood trauma.

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ⁱ Numbers between brackets are referred to the *Recitatif*, according to Morrison (1995b).