

“He Mought, en Den Again He Moughtent”: The Ambiguous Man in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss Toni Morrison’s 1981 novel, *Tar Baby*, through the lens of a trickster tale on which the novel is loosely based. *Tar Baby* invites one to choose sides between Jadine, the African American female protagonist with a European education and worldviews, or Son, the bearer of a more traditional African American cultural heritage and values. Son is initially constructed as other, and his representation is based on negative stereotypical notions of the African American male. First impressions need to be revised later, as the text plays with the readers’ sympathies about Son. Even his survival is left open at the end of the novel and the range of options of how to categorize Son would seem to reflect the readers’ perceptions back on themselves. In this way, Morrison sets up a trap in which any reader making too easy or essentialist definitions of the character will fall. Thus, the most important expression of the trickster tale is the novel’s name: the novel itself is the tar baby. Moreover, the most important construction of tar lies in the ambiguous representation of Son.

Keywords: African American, stereotypes, trickster, tar baby, racism

There is an old tale of Brer Rabbit and tar baby, which was originally brought with the slave ships to North America from West Africa.¹ In the

1 I am referring here to a version in one of Joel Chandler Harris’ Uncle Remus books. Although similar stories can be found in the folklore of many Native American, Meso-American, and South American tribes, even in India and Iran, Morrison clearly explores the tale’s African roots in *Tar Baby*. Brer Rabbit stories have been transformed into their current form to fit the experiences on the plantation and are, therefore, primarily African American rather than African stories.

story, Brer Fox has made a “baby” out of tar and turpentine and put it in a sitting position at the side of the road, hiding himself in the bushes. Brer Rabbit passes by and, greeting the tar baby and getting no answer, becomes angry. After a few more trials, the tar baby remaining silent, the maddened rabbit attacks it. With every punch and kick however, he becomes more and more stuck on the tar. When Brer Fox finds the rabbit completely stuck on the tar baby, he cannot stop laughing. In some versions of the tale – told by the ex-slave Uncle Remus to a white child – the story pauses at this point and the boy asks whether the fox killed and ate the rabbit. Uncle Remus answers: “Dat’s all de fur de tale goes [...] He mought, en den again he moughtent. Some say Jedge B’ar come long en loosed ‘im – some say he didn’t,”² and continues the story later on. Other versions, however, move straight from the scene in which Brer Fox finds Brer Rabbit stuck on tar to the point where Uncle Remus continues the tale as follows: The trapped rabbit figures out a trick of his own, he begs the fox to burn him alive, or strangle him to death – anything except throwing him into the briar patch. Soon the fox will do just that, and the rabbit, having of course been born and bred in the briar patch, gains his freedom. While many different versions of the trickster tale exist, this particular one seems to be the source of inspiration for Toni Morrison’s 1981 novel, *Tar Baby*.³ Telling the failed love story of Jadine Childs and Son Green, *Tar Baby* feeds on the tradition of African American storytelling and, at the same time, warns against leaning on limiting categories of people, places, and situations.

Although it contains typical features of trickster tales, *Tar Baby*’s open ending and refusal to answer questions made critics ponder on their meanings, leading James Coleman even to deem the novel “a failure.”⁴ Another notable debate, discussed by Letitia L. Moffitt, concerned finding the “moral center” or the “central—or ‘true’—vision” of the story.⁵ The text invites one to choose sides between Jadine, the novel’s light-skinned African American female protagonist with a European education and worldviews

2 Joel Chandler Harris. *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*. Compiled by Richard Chase. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1955).

3 Joel Chandler Harris, “The Wonderful Tar Baby,” in *The Favorite Uncle Remus* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Riverside Press, 1948), 47-54.

4 James Coleman, “The Quest for Wholeness in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” *Black American Literature Forum* 20.1/2 (1986): 72.

5 Letitia L. Moffitt, “Finding the Door: Vision/Revision in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” *CRITIQUE: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 46.1 (2004): 13-17.

– provided to her by a wealthy white man, Valerian – or Son, the bearer of a more traditional African American cultural heritage and values. Readers will surely try to force their own interpretations on this ambiguous text, depending on their theoretical as well as cultural backgrounds, for example. As all the main characters in *Tar Baby* can be seen as heroes, villains, redeemers of each other, tricksters, and much more, the novel explicitly challenges the desire for stable interpretations. Thus, the most important expression of the trickster tale is the novel's name: the novel *itself* is the tar baby. My argument is that the most significant construction of tar lies in the ambiguous and controversial representation of Son.

By searching for someone to identify with and feel sympathy for, readers are in danger of becoming “stuck” on this novel. By being stuck, I mean readers' possible frustration, which might lead them to regard the ambiguousness of character representation as a part of the novel's overall failure, and thus disregard the novel's complexity. Similarly, Moffitt argues that Morrison has created “a tar-baby-like ‘trap’”⁶ which to her is “judging the characters in terms of overly simplistic, quickly formed definitions based on their apparent roles.”⁷ Agreeing with Moffitt, I will concentrate in this article on how Morrison sets up the trap with Son's ambiguous portrayal. While his narrative role cannot be completely separated from Jadine's, I view Son in particular as an embodiment of tar: his ambiguous representation stands for a pit into which readers might fall as they seek to locate ever-changing objects of sympathy. He, for example, is at one and the same time rebel, misogynist, trickster, and hero. Even his survival is left open at the end of the novel and the range of options of how to categorize Son would seem to reflect readers' perceptions back on themselves. By doing this, Morrison deliberately keeps readers in suspense about the real nature of Son, and even encourages readers to adopt stereotypical reactions to him in order to challenge the stereotypes. Moffitt suggests that, because readers get to see all the different characters' perspectives in the course of the novel they are able to develop nuanced views of the characters and thereby avoid the trap.⁸ In my view, though, a “correct” reading is impossible as the novel turns every perspective upside down in Son's ambiguous portrayal.

6 Ibid., 14.

7 Ibid., 14.

8 Ibid., 14, 24.

Therefore, the question of whether Son represents the “voice of righteousness”⁹ or the hero¹⁰ of the story cannot be answered. Like Uncle Remus, all we know is that “[h]e mought, en den again he moughtent.” Many critics, however, have approached this question with the help of the Brer Rabbit story. It is possible to recast the characters of Morrison’s *Tar Baby* by placing Valerian in the role of Brer Fox, Son in the role of Brer Rabbit, and Jadine as the tar baby, as, for example, Ann Rayson does.¹¹ This common interpretation is supported by a considerable amount of textual evidence and would make Jadine the white man’s creation, put “at the side of the road” just to lure the trickster hero of the story, Son, to get stuck on her.¹² Lauren Lepow, linking *Tar Baby* to the myth of Eden and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,¹³ views Jadine as the novel’s hero because she rejects dualism,¹⁴ which to Lepow represents the original sin in Morrison’s novel.¹⁵ By contrast, Evelyn Hawthorne¹⁶ suggests that Jadine is constantly ridiculed by the novel, while Son is “the most sympathetically treated character,” even “Morrison’s reflector character of the work.”¹⁷ To Hawthorne, Son’s “self” is the only one “in the process of reformation” at the conclusion of the story,¹⁸ while in my reading Jadine manages to overcome the stereotypical reactions to her and live beyond the need to define herself according to race.¹⁹ Whether or not a similar fate is available for Son is one of the questions that remain unanswered.

9 Ibid., 16.

10 I am using the word “hero” in the sense that refers to a character that is leading the narrative, is likely to get the sympathies of the audience, and “wins” at the end as opposed to referring to a person that is celebrated for courage and nobleness, for example.

11 Ann Rayson, “Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge? The African American Woman in *Quicksand* and *Tar Baby*,” *MELUS* 23.2 (1998).

12 In *Tar Baby*, Valerian has “made” Jadine by paying for her European education, which is implied by Son when he tells her the first part of the tar baby story (Morrison, 270), and even refers to Jadine as tar baby (220). Furthermore, Jadine is constructed as the tar baby when she falls into a swamp (182) and Son’s departure at the end of the novel parallels that of Brer Rabbit’s (306), for example.

13 Lauren Lepow, “Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*,” *Contemporary Literature* 28.3 (1987).

14 Ibid., 372.

15 Ibid., 369.

16 Evelyn Hawthorne, “On Gaining the Double-Vision: *Tar Baby* as Diasporan Novel,” *Black American Literature Forum* 22.1 (1988).

17 Ibid., 104.

18 Ibid., 106.

19 Tuula Kolehmainen, “And My Sign Didn’t Make Sense Without Hers: Challenging Stereotypes in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, ‘Recitatif,’ and *Tar Baby*” (Master’s Thesis, University of Helsinki, 2011).

However, recasting the characters to pick out heroes and villains fails to acknowledge the ambiguity and complexity of the story and its characters, as well as the tradition on which it feeds. As Jeanne Rosier Smith suggests, *Tar Baby's* open ending is typical of trickster tales, and "Morrison specifically connects *Tar Baby's* ending to an African dilemma tale tradition, distinguishing it from Western folktales."²⁰ Within some African traditions, a dilemma tale usually carries a moral question that is left unanswered for the audience to ponder, and often has an educational function. In the African American folktale tradition, best known in the Brer Rabbit stories, the closure of the story is less significant than what has been learned along the way. Smith argues, "Br'er Rabbit by no means wins every test of wits; but whether he wins or loses a particular conflict matters less than the accumulated tradition of tales in which he somehow always escapes and survives."²¹ In addition, drawing from Bakhtin's and Henry Louis Gates Jr's theories, Smith argues that both the narrator and Morrison herself can be viewed as trickster figures, suggesting that Morrison uses a "tricksterlike narrative technique."²² To Smith, Son "is the classic trickster, a nameless outlaw, a masterful storyteller, a catalyst whose presence disrupts the tenuously held serenity of the social order."²³ In my view, Morrison could be characterized in a similar way: what we as readers of *Tar Baby* once held as truth is constantly unsettled by a masterful "trickster" storyteller. Of course, rather than merely retelling the tale of Brer Rabbit and tar baby, Morrison appears to use the tradition as a tool for telling her own. The most important remaining question, however, is what we learn about ourselves – and the prejudices we might hold – through reading her story.

One way of looking at Son is seeing him through the lens of the African American oral tale tradition, as a folk hero trickster like Brer Rabbit. Having both African and European origins, Brer Rabbit tales are namely African American in that they were taken into use by African slaves in America and modified to best serve the needs of the enslaved communities. According to John W. Roberts,

20 Jeanne Rosier Smith, *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1997), 141.

21 *Ibid.*, 112-113.

22 *Ibid.*, 144.

23 *Ibid.*, 129.

folk heroic creation occurs because groups, at critical moments in time, recognize in the actions of certain figures, which may already be known to them, qualities or behaviors that they have reason to believe would enhance culture-building (that is, their ability to protect the identity and values of the group in the face of a threat to them).²⁴

In the context of African slavery in America, the animal trickster served the need of a folk hero who would win in the battle of wits against other animals more powerful than him. In other words, in African American folktales, the hero is not the one who is the strongest and wins the love of the woman, but can indeed be the best deceiver of the powerful, the one that gets away, the outlaw.

As a number of critics have pointed out (e.g. Jeanne Rosier Smith and Trudier Harris), the roles of Brer Rabbit as trickster and the tar baby as deceptive trap can be assigned to more than one character in *Tar Baby*, and this is symptomatic of the way Morrison ultimately withholds a definitive judgment or final analysis. William J. Hynes²⁵ has pointed out that a key feature of the trickster figure is ambiguity, which is also the main trait of Son's portrayal. His thoughts, words, and deeds are in constant conflict with each other. He is represented in terms of the most negative stereotypes that are connected to African American men, and yet the story entices us to side with him, even feel sympathy for him. In this way, the novel sets up a trap, a tar pit into which any reader making too categorizing definitions of the characters will fall. Trying to form a set opinion of Son's character is dangerous, because the story has a way of reversing fixed judgments. Forcing interpretations that are based on one's own preconceptions onto the open questions is like punching a sticky effigy and getting even more stuck. What does not stick, however, is the stereotyping of the African American male. If the tar pit is seen as sacred and tar as a unifying material, as Morrison implies in an interview with Thomas Leclair,²⁶ I would suggest that

24 John W. Roberts, *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 5.

25 William J. Hynes, "Mapping the Characteristics of Mythic Tricksters: A Heuristic Guide" in *Mythical Trickster Figures: Contours, Contexts, and Criticisms*, ed. William J. Hynes et al. (Tuscaloosa & London: The University of Alabama Press, 1997), 34. Hynes characterizes the trickster under six features: 1) anomalous and ambiguous, 2) deceiver/trick player, 3) shape-shifter, 4) situation inverter, 5) messenger/ imitator of the gods, 6) sacred/lewd bricoleur.

26 "The Language Must Not Sweat," *New Republic*, accessed February 29, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/95923/the-language-must-not-sweat>. Morrison says that to her, tar baby stands for the Black woman who can "hold things together," and a substance with which to build things.

getting stuck on *Tar Baby* is not necessarily harmful but can actually build bridges between the reader and the text, as well as between different people. It is made possible by the gradual deconstruction of racist stereotypes, starting from the very first impressions of the male protagonist.

***Tar Baby* and First Impressions**

Although the initial impressions of Son are his own internal focalizations, he is portrayed as a stranger and an outlaw from the first pages of the novel. His name is not revealed, and he is referred to as “he” and “the man.”²⁷ The text makes clear that Son is a solitary fugitive as he is jumping ship and starting his passage to an island called Isle des Chevaliers: “he had no things to gather—no book of postage, no razor blade, no key to any door.”²⁸ Nevertheless, we have no reason to doubt the righteousness of his purposes at this point, and Yvette Christians even notes, “he is the most positive male figure in all of Morrison’s novels up until *Tar Baby*.”²⁹ Before the stranger’s arrival, Valerian, the white owner of a big house in the Caribbean, L’Arbe de la Croix, and his wife Margaret, a former beauty queen, and their African American servants, Sydney and Ondine Childs, seem to have balanced roles and relationships with each other. Even the niece of the servants, Jadine, whose education in Europe Valerian has paid for, fits the equilibrium of the house. When Son is found hiding in Margaret’s closet, having been lurking around the house for days, the balance is interrupted. In the passage, Son is taken at gunpoint by Sydney from Margaret’s room to the dining room. The scene challenges the possible presumptions of readers expecting a storyline where African Americans are idealized and white Americans criticized. As the story progresses, readers are forced to revise their initial reactions to the characters as well as confront their own possible prejudgments.

Morrison herself has addressed these conceptions in her theoretical work *Playing in the Dark*,³⁰ where she discusses the functions of Africanist personae in the works of, for example, Edgar Allan Poe, Ernest Hemingway, and Willa Cather. By contrast with these personae, in her own work

27 Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (New York: Vintage International, 2004), 5.

28 *Ibid.*, 3.

29 Yvette Christians, *Toni Morrison: An Ethical Poetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 184.

30 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1992).

she has expressed a need to “learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains.”³¹ In the scene where Son is first introduced to the other characters of the novel, however, Morrison seems to be using exactly the language she herself criticizes. In my reading, the goal of “freeing up the language” is accomplished in *Tar Baby* by the way the narrative is first filled with the racially marked characterization of Son and then is freed from it by means of irony and exaggeration. By the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Morrison is simply playing with the racialized language only to disarm it and challenge its power. The first impressions of Son dismiss him through stereotypes of race and class, disregarding the multiplicities of identity, and the readers are in danger of being trapped into having similar preconceptions.

The process starts as Son is being represented according to racial myths that have their roots in Social Darwinism and eugenics. He is described as animal-like, child-like, unclean, ignorant, perverted, and generally in very racist terms. Racist stereotypes are both long-standing and insistent, and according to bell hooks, black men are still, in the 21st century, seen as “animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers”³² by many white people. In *Tar Baby*, however, it is the other African American characters that react to Son as a brute, since their views of him are influenced or shaped by the very same racial myths. Sydney and Ondine’s comments include stereotypes of “badness” (no-count), hypersexuality (pervert), and that of the rapist. Sydney, who calls himself a Philadelphia Negro, “the proudest people in the race,”³³ refers to Son as “a wife-raper”³⁴ and “a wild-eyed pervert”³⁵ while Ondine calls Son “a crazy hobo”³⁶ and later “a no-count Negro.”³⁷ Sydney and Ondine seem to have internalized the racism of Western culture as a survival strategy to save themselves from it.³⁸

31 Ibid., XI.

32 bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), xii.

33 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 61.

34 Ibid., 99.

35 Ibid., 100.

36 Ibid., 101.

37 Ibid., 193.

38 A similar phenomenon can be seen in Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in which the whole all-black community constructs a scapegoat of one of its most vulnerable members, a little African American girl, Pecola Breedlove, due to internalized racism.

Similar reactions to Son are revealed as the narrative shows the inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix pondering on their first encounter with Son, and the primary source of information is Margaret. Son's brute-like appearance and Margaret's prejudices are made clear as she reminisces about meeting Son for the first time. She contemplates whether "the bum that even Sydney wanted to shoot,"³⁹ "this real live dope addict ape,"⁴⁰ had "killed everybody"⁴¹ and she even plans to organize a street patrol with the neighbors.⁴² Margaret is also quite sure of the hypersexuality of the stranger: "In her things. Actually, in her things. Probably jerking off. Black sperm was sticking in clots to her French jeans and Anne Klein shoes."⁴³ Within only a couple of sentences, the most common stereotypes of the African American male are listed: animality, violent behavior, criminality, and hypersexuality. Margaret's reactions to Son are so strongly stereotypical that they seem to be exaggerated to create a humorous response in the reader, so that the agent of stereotyping and the stereotypes themselves are held up to ironic scrutiny.

Following the reactions of Margaret, as well as those of her uncle and aunt, Jadine is appalled by the stranger, who "burrowed in his plate like an animal, grunting monosyllables, but not daring to look up."⁴⁴ She refers to Son as "a nigger"⁴⁵ and a "raggedy black man" who had "rape, theft or murder on his mind."⁴⁶ Jadine defines herself as equal to her patrons Valerian and Margaret, and sees Son as a savage. As Moffitt suggests, in the beginning of the novel "this is the only way the characters can relate to each other: by creating boundaries by means of stereotypes, to define themselves."⁴⁷ Only Valerian, to everybody else's astonishment, welcomes the stranger to the house and offers him a drink and a place to stay. The other inhabitants of L'Arbe de la Croix are confused by Valerian's conduct, and some readers might find this scene disturbing. Son – called a "stinking ignorant swamp nigger"⁴⁸ by Sydney – is racially excluded by the other

39 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 83.

40 *Ibid.*, 87.

41 *Ibid.*, 84.

42 *Ibid.*, 84.

43 *Ibid.*, 86.

44 *Ibid.*, 94.

45 *Ibid.*, 92.

46 *Ibid.*, 91.

47 Moffitt, "Finding the Door," 15.

48 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 100.

African American characters, as they see themselves above him in racial hierarchy while the white patriarch, Valerian, who treats Son as any other houseguest, is portrayed as the only benevolent person. In a sense, Morrison illustrates through Son “the image of the reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness [that] became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona,”⁴⁹ which she discusses in *Playing in the Dark*. In this way, the first point at which readers might get stuck on easy conclusions is set up.

The next assumption that might be made is that since the narrative is creating boundaries and contrasts between Jadine and Son, who are both African American, Jadine must be the hero of the story. Morrison is more often than not defined as a feminist writer, so the assumption that Jadine would reflect the author’s values would fit well, and the fact that Son is represented as a misogynist makes this reading even more natural. When Jadine and Son have their first conversation, Son makes Jadine laugh and even feel “a flash of pity”⁵⁰ towards him, but the situation is reversed as Son treats Jadine rudely by accusing her of having had sex with powerful people to gain success as a model. Jadine, on the other hand, accuses Son of trying to rape her, after which Son offensively calls her a “white girl.”⁵¹ As the characters lean on stereotypes when they encounter each other, the narrative persuades readers to take sides between them and thus adopt similar stereotypical reactions to them.

The previously discussed initial reactions to Son by the other characters are highly based on binary oppositions. Stuart Hall argues that

people who are in any way significantly different from the majority – ‘them’ rather than ‘us’ – are frequently exposed to this *binary* form of representation. They seem to be presented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling-because-strange-and-exotic. And they are often required to be *both things at the same time!*⁵²

These are the very same paired opposites through which all the other characters view themselves and Son: he is described as being ugly and unat-

49 Morrison, *Playing*, 39.

50 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 119.

51 *Ibid.*, 121.

52 Stuart Hall ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1997), 229, emphasis original.

tractive by the servants and Margaret; and whereas they view themselves as good, they deem Son as bad. To Jadine, on the other hand, he is both “repelling-because-different” and “compelling-because-strange-and-exotic,” which is foregrounded by the description of Son’s hair. Jadine thinks Son has “[w]ild, aggressive, vicious hair that needed to be put in jail. Uncivilized, reform-school hair. Mau Mau, Attica, chain-gang hair.”⁵³ Numerous historical and cultural references are also made here, again associated with the stereotyping of the African American male. The chain gang obviously refers to slavery. Mau Mau, on the other hand, points to a 1950s’ conflict where a Kenyan nationalist group known as Mau Mau rebelled violently against the British colonizers. Here the allusion underlines the fact that Jadine views Son as a savage and uneducated criminal, as the Kenyans were seen by the British, as opposed to her own imagined goodness, produced by European education. A similar reference is made in mentioning Attica, where there was a prison revolt in 1971, only a decade before *Tar Baby* was published.⁵⁴ That Jadine thinks Son’s hair should be put in prison reflects her need to take control of her almost uncontrollable attraction to the oversexualized savage other. After seeing him smile for the first time, Jadine stands speechless and stares at Son’s hair, which looks “overpowering – physically overpowering, like bundles of long whips or lashes that could grab her and beat her to jelly. And would.”⁵⁵

Later that day when Son visits Valerian in the greenhouse, however, the narrative reminds us of Son’s low status in the hierarchy of the house. Valerian, having been told the name Son uses of himself, William, immediately renames him Willie⁵⁶ in a patronizing, even infantilizing manner. Through his dialogue with Valerian in the greenhouse, Son’s misogyny is further revealed. He tells Valerian a sexist joke and that he knows ““all about plants. They like women, you have to jack them up every once in a while. Make em act nice, like they’re supposed to.””⁵⁷ The way Son is represented at this stage of the novel gives little room for sympathizing with him. However,

53 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 113.

54 According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, “[r]acial tensions were also a major factor” in the revolt, because “the inmate population was nearly 55 percent African American and 10 percent Hispanic while all the guards were white.” See “Attica Prison Revolt,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed, October 4, 2015. <http://global.britannica.com/topic/Attica-prison-revolt>

55 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 113.

56 *Ibid.*, 146.

57 *Ibid.*, 148.

the context for Son's attitudes should be acknowledged. Hooks argues, "Most black males are being encouraged through their uncritical acceptance of patriarchy to live in the past, to be stuck in time. More often than not they are stuck in the place of rage."⁵⁸ Son is certainly stuck in his past and somewhat patriarchal values, and one way of viewing Son's behavior is to consider it Morrison's critique of the patriarchal values that make some males act according to obsolete attitudes. By now the male protagonist has been constructed as a stranger and other but also as a misogynist, and his representation becomes even more ambiguous as the narrative moves on to persuading us to feel sympathy for him.

Getting Stuck

As noted earlier, Moffitt contends that the most complete or correct view is the readers' and it is true that through multiple focalizations we are provided access to each of the character's perspectives. The omniscient narrator moves between the different rooms of the house as well as between the consciousnesses of its inhabitants, reporting personal thoughts and private conversations. The question could be raised, of course, whether one can trust the trickster narrator or the trickster author, not to mention the characters. Nevertheless, as we get a glimpse behind the mask of stereotype and Son's personal history is revealed, the novel entices us to sympathize with him. For example, he has been through hard times: "lambs, chickens, tuna, children – he had seen them all die by the ton. There was nothing like it in the world, except the slaughter of whole families and he had seen it too."⁵⁹ Here the narrative provides a close look at how Son remembers experiencing horrifying times in the Vietnam War and, whether or not readers have had similar experiences, they can perceive Son's suffering as something they would not wish for themselves or others. In addition, it may be acknowledged that much of Son's action is explained by the fact that he has been merely surviving through life. Survival is also the main goal of Brer Rabbit, who is even considered a folk hero despite the fact that he is deceitful and "ez sassy ez a jay-bird,"⁶⁰ just like Son. Many behavioral patterns are excused as survival strategies, or

⁵⁸ hooks, *We Real Cool*, 60.

⁵⁹ Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 131.

⁶⁰ Harris, "The Wonderful Tar Baby," 47.

caused by trauma. In this way, readers may be forced to revise their initial impressions of the character.

Another point where the text incites us to sympathize with Son is as his sensitive side is shown through his contemplation on his past and his name:

Son. It was the name that called forth the true him. The him that he never lied to the one he tucked in at night and the one he did not want to die. The other selves were like the words he spoke – fabrications of the moment, misinformation required to protect Son from harm and to secure that one reality at least.⁶¹

The pet name was given to Son by his community back in Florida, and it is the name that carries the memory of his family, community, and cultural past: “His father, Franklin G. Green, had been called Old Man since he was seven years old and when he grew up, got married, had a baby boy, the baby was called Old Man’s son until the second child was born and the first became simply Son.”⁶² Along with his family and friends, Son seems to cherish his cultural heritage, and is respectful of the islanders Gideon and Thérèse. Coleman argues that Son is “a sensitive, warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities,”⁶³ and it is true that he is, at times, represented as such. However, his misogynistic thoughts seem to originate from the same place as his folk values and warmth: his hometown Eloë. The depiction of the small all-black community is as ambiguous as that of Son’s: in Eloë unmarried couples should not sleep in the same room, but Son’s friend Soldier tells Jadine Son’s late wife had “the best pussy in the state,”⁶⁴ exemplifying a harsh, condescending way of talking about women as opposed to the seemingly virtuous values of the community.

Understanding the social and cultural contexts for Son’s behavior and becoming familiar with his vulnerable side enables one to feel sympathy for him. Tanja Vesala-Varttala presents a “magnetic connectedness between the self and the other” as one of sympathy’s basic meaning components.⁶⁵

61 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 139.

62 *Ibid.*, 246-247.

63 Coleman, “The Quest for Wholeness,” 65.

64 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 305.

65 Tanja Vesala-Varttala, “Sympathy and Joyce’s *Dubliners*: Ethical Probing of Reading, Narrative, and Textuality” (PhD diss., University of Tampere, 1999), 30.

Comparing various definitions of sympathy, Vesala-Varttala views the “magnetic quality” of sympathy in that

certain things tend towards each other and exist in relation to each other. Things or persons are connected to, attracted by, or dependent on each other in such a way that a change in the condition of one necessarily leads to a corresponding change in another.⁶⁶

Sympathy as a magnetic power may attract us to the male protagonist and, when connected to him, it can be more difficult to adjust or reverse previous sympathetic reactions to him – even though the narrative persuades us to do so by revealing additional ambiguities in Son’s character. Vesala-Varttala continues, “Lauren Wispé has remarked that people often sympathize with those to whom they feel akin. There is a certain ‘we-feeling’ involved in sympathy; it is a matter of ‘we,’ ‘us,’ and ‘ours.’”⁶⁷ Since Jadine and Son are in constant conflict about cultural values and Jadine appears as an African American woman who has lost her “ancient properties”⁶⁸ in internalizing Western values and is, by implication, unsympathetic to some readers, they might choose to sympathize with Son instead. In other words, depending on their own backgrounds, some readers may sympathize with Son because they feel they have – due to shared values, for example – more in common with Son than Jadine. Others may sympathize with Jadine – a highly educated and successful woman who fights the stereotypical roles imposed on her and escapes her abuser. Even the debate among critics, discussed by Moffitt, is an example of the need of readers to sympathize with either Son or Jadine and the difficulty of changing the object of sympathy. J. Brooks Bouson argues that critics “get stuck in the ‘tar baby’ of a critical and emotional impasse as they participate in the shame and blame drama presented in the narrative.”⁶⁹

The narrative attracts us on Son’s side by persuading us to co-feel the sympathies of the other characters towards Son as he is gradually accepted and sympathized by them. Even though he has enraged and frightened most of the inhabitants at L’Arbe de la Croix, Son knows how to reverse the

66 Ibid., 36.

67 Ibid., 41.

68 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 305.

69 J. Brooks Bouson, *Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 129.

situation. Here his role as both the tar baby and the trickster are present: tar baby is made by Brer Fox, and similarly Son is cleaned and dressed in new clothes, made anew by Valerian. He puts on the white man's clothes and cuts his chain-gang hair, and is immediately more attractive to most of the people in the house who are "seduced by the Hickey Freeman suit and the haircut."⁷⁰ The scene also underlines the shape-shifter trait of Son the trickster, one that "can alter his shape or bodily appearance in order to facilitate deception."⁷¹ He shifts his shapes also in the sense that, one by one, he starts to win over the people of the house, and consequently, perhaps, the readers as well. He apologizes to everyone and helps Valerian with his greenhouse. He makes Ondine's heart melt by eating a lot of her food⁷² and Sydney's by asking if he could eat with them in the kitchen,⁷³ thus creating a "fellow-feeling" between Sydney and Ondine and himself. Later he even wins Margaret's attention by flattering her and asking about her son, Michael,⁷⁴ pleasing everybody with behavior accepted by each one of them. Jadine is the toughest, because she is trying her best not to be seduced by Son and also because of his misogynist words and actions. By now, however, Son has been represented – quite the contrary to his portrayal as the savage – as a handsome, witty man with good social skills, a sensitive side, and a traumatic history.

Those of us who cannot resist the magnetism of sympathy are going to struggle through the narrative that later reveals Son to be, in fact, a wife killer, a liar, a violent man. As it turns out, he is prone to dualistic thinking and defines himself and others by race, preserves his identity by denigrating other people, and possesses a worldview that is essentialist and apparently unchanging. For example, he thinks that "[p]eople don't mix races; they abandon them or pick them."⁷⁵ His interior monologue also reveals his demeaning thoughts about Jadine: "[g]atekeeper, advance bitch, house-bitch, welfare office torpedo, corporate cunt, tar baby side-of-the-road whore trap."⁷⁶ These examples would either distance him from being "a sensitive,

70 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 165.

71 Hynes, "Mapping," 36.

72 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 161.

73 *Ibid.*, 164.

74 *Ibid.*, 198.

75 *Ibid.*, 27.

76 *Ibid.*, 219-220.

warm man who possesses definite folk values and qualities,⁷⁷ or indicate that – in Son’s case – folk values and qualities do not imply equality.

Later, however, the narrative explains the motives for Son’s cruel words and behavior towards Jadine through his interior monologue:

For if he loved and lost this woman whose sleeping face was the limit his eyes could safely behold and whose wakened face threw him into confusion, he would surely lose the world. So he made himself disgusting to her. Insulted and offended her. Gave her sufficient cause to help him keep his love in chains and hoped to God that the lock would hold. It snapped like a string.⁷⁸

Knowing that he actually loves Jadine and only said such cruel things to her in order to protect himself might affect the readers’ sympathies. However, even Morrison herself has asserted her own views on Son in an interview with Nellie McKay as follows: “you can’t really trust all that he says,”⁷⁹ and it makes one wonder whether Son’s inner thoughts are sincere or if they are – as he describes his own words – mere “fabrications of the moment.”⁸⁰

The ambiguity of Son’s representation is also shown in his thoughts on gender equality. His previous chauvinist utterings seem like a performance or mere jokes, as his way of thinking about the women in his hometown shows him to fully accept gender equality: “[s]he kept barking at him about equality, sexual equality, as though he thought women were inferior (...) Anybody who thought women were inferior didn’t come from north Florida.”⁸¹ He treasures the women of Eloë, but he did kill his wife, Chayenne. The narrative explains the deed by offering context: Right after finding out that Chayenne had a teenage lover, Son drove through the room where they were sleeping together. Knowing the context, it might be easier to have some sense of why he did it, at least for those who are inclined to side with Son or have sympathy for him.

However, the narrative resists categorizing the characters by combining repulsion and attraction, judgment and sympathy, and subverting initial and subsequent reactions to Son by providing additional information on his character. The scene where Son allegedly rapes Jadine in New York is cru-

77 Coleman, “The Quest for Wholeness,” 65.

78 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 220.

79 Nellie McKay, “An Interview With Toni Morrison,” *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (1983): 423.

80 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 139.

81 *Ibid.*, 268.

cial, at least if the text has succeeded in magnetically connecting Son and the reader. The passage involves the tar baby story, which Son tells Jadine while approaching her on the bed, having torn open his own shirt.⁸² John Duvall argues that most critics have missed the actual rape, the reason being that until that point, the text has been “in pains to construct Son as non-rapist by questioning stereotypes about black male sexuality.”⁸³ With this scene, – already thoroughly discussed by Duvall – I argue, that Morrison plays a trick on anybody still thinking Son could stand for the character that reflects the author’s ideals and makes it clear that nobody is on the winning or correct side in this novel. Son as the multivocal trickster appears to defy all categories, even that of the non-rapist.

Even at this point *Tar Baby* strongly refuses to provide any definitive answers to its readers but, quite the contrary, steers the action towards an even more ambiguous final scene. Jadine returns to the Caribbean to meet her uncle and aunt, while Son stays in New York waiting for her to come back. After a while Son decides to follow Jadine, and gets a boat ride from one of the islanders, Thérèse, back to the Isle des Chevaliers where Valerian’s house is located. According to the islanders, marooned blind slaves hid on the island three hundred years ago and became a group of mythic horsemen still riding around the island. Thérèse tricks Son on the other side of the island and leaves him there, apparently forcing him to decide whether to go after Jadine or become one of the mythic horsemen.

The last words of *Tar Baby* are “Lickety-split. Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety-split,”⁸⁴ evoking Brer Rabbit’s successful escape at the end of Joel Chandler Harris’s tale. In *Tar Baby* a number of interpretations are possible – is Son running towards safety or is the sound of his running soon to be joined with the noise of the thundering hooves of the mythic horsemen? Whether joining the horsemen would mean becoming a part of a still resistant indigenous spirit world of the island – or its slave, forever galloping around the island – is not made clear. The ending is open and makes one wonder whether Son returns to the house and is shot by Sydney or dies and becomes a part of the myth of the horsemen, or whether he will become free. On an allegorical level, the questions raised concern the freedom or

82 Ibid., 270.

83 John D. Duvall, “Descent in the ‘House of Chloe’: Race, Rape, and Identity in Toni Morrison’s ‘Tar Baby,’” *Contemporary Literature* 38.2 (1997): 335.

84 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 306.

further slavery of the African American male. According to Rayson, “[i]n the late twentieth century, it [was] the African American male who [was] trapped”⁸⁵ and, at the conclusion of *Tar Baby*, Morrison leaves the audience to consider whether the African American male can or cannot be freed from the trap of stereotypes and racist mainstream representations. Like the source story, *Tar Baby* asks more questions than it is ready to answer.

Conclusions

Son is stuck in time, and trapped by racism and conservative notions on class and gender. Yet again, he represents a trap himself, a warning for readers not to stumble over similar, too-easily-constructed categorizations. First impressions of the male character in *Tar Baby* need to be adjusted as we read on, and then readjusted, as additional information about him is revealed. Son is a trickster, and like the trickster, he is a “‘criminal’ culture hero, [and thus] embodies all possibilities—the most positive and the most negative—and is paradox personified.”⁸⁶ His portrayal shifts between the outlaw, and the sensitive folk hero, between the “[m]ama-spoiled black man”⁸⁷ desperately in love with Jadine and the wife-killer and possible rapist. Trying to make sense of him according to good-and-bad dichotomies is likely to trap readers and cause them to become stuck on *Tar Baby*. According to Hynes, “the trickster’s position midway between the gods and humans allows him to function as a cultural transformer.”⁸⁸ The fact that readers of *Tar Baby* might get tricked can indeed lead to cultural transformation as common stereotypes and beliefs about people and literature are subverted. Morrison’s epistemological aim, through the representation of Son, seems to be to refuse to commit herself to fixed definitions of black male identity, or any ready-made roles for herself, her characters, or her audience. *Tar Baby* is confusing in many ways, but the ambiguous representation of this male character is its stickiest aspect.

It is important to note that it is not the reader’s duty to decide where Son ends up. As Thérèse says, he has the choice now. Following the dilemma

85 Rayson, “Foreign Exotic,” 97.

86 Barbara Babcock, “‘A Tolerated Margin of Mess’: The Trickster and his Tales Reconsidered,” in *Critical Essays on Native American Literature*, ed. Andrew Wiget (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), 154.

87 Morrison, *Tar Baby*, 269.

88 Hynes, “Mapping,” 40.

tale tradition, we can merely reflect upon his story. Here in essence is a major theme of the novel, namely the fact that Morrison pays tribute to the trickster tale tradition by leaving Son's fate unresolved. He remains "betwixt and between"⁸⁹ good and bad, right and wrong, dead and alive. At the closure of his story we do not know whether he loved Jadine, raped her, or ever met her again. We do not even know whether he stayed alive. The only possible answer to the questions about his fate can be traced back to Harris: "He mought, en den again he moughtent."⁹⁰

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89 Babcock, "Tolerated," 159. Babcock suggests that "Marginal figures also tend to be associated with marketplaces, crossroads, and other open places which are 'betwixt and between' clearly defined social statuses or spaces or in which normal structures or patterns of relating break down—with places of transition, movement, and license."

90 Joel Chandler Harris, *The Complete Tales of Uncle Remus*, 8.

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