Recitatif

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI MORRISON

Toni Morrison was born to an African-American family who moved to Ohio during the Great Migration. She has said that her father's experiences of Southern racism led him to vocally resent white people. He taught the young Morrison stories from the African-American folktale tradition, which she learned alongside classics of the Western literary canon. Morrison received her BA from Howard University and her MA from Cornell, eventually returning to teach at Howard after a stint at Texas Southern University. She married the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison, with whom she had two children before the couple divorced. It was not until she was 30 and raising two children in addition to working as a professor and editor that Morrison first began writing. She joined a writers' group at Howard, where she workshopped a story that eventually became her critically-acclaimed first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970. Some of Morrison's most famous works include *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. She is one of the most widely-read living American writers and arguably the most famous African-American female author. She was also the first African-American to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature, which she was awarded in 1993. Morrison's work explores themes of race, gender, sexuality, and the family, and often features the perspectives of children. She is unafraid of broaching controversial themes, such as incest, rape, and—in the famous case of *Beloved*—a child's murder by her own mother. While her writing often exposes the sinister side of human nature, she also leaves space for forgiveness, redemption, and optimism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Recitatif" is set during three different time periods, all of which saw notable racial tensions and shifts in culture within the US. The first part of the story, when Roberta and Twyla are eight years old, takes place in the 1950s. During this period, Jim Crow segregation was in full swing and the Civil Rights Movement began. In 1954, the Supreme Court issued Brown vs. Board of Education, which outlawed school segregation. In 1957, the famous "Little Rock Nine"—nine African-American students enrolled in a previously white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas—were met with severe protests by white segregationists and eventually required the intervention of President Eisenhower to be able to actually set foot in their school. The next stage of the story is set during the 1960s, when Roberta and Twyla are young adults. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, and the Black Power movement gained momentum during this period, particularly following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. Meanwhile, the '60s also saw a huge cultural shift, with the rise of a rebellious youthful counter-culture which was broadly defined by rejection of conservative social norms, progressive politics, and an embrace of "sex, drugs, rock'n'roll." A key figure of this culture was the psychedelic rock guitarist Jimi Hendrix, whom Roberta is on her way to visit when she stops at Howard Johnson's. The 1970s saw marginal improvements in race relations, but black communities still faced high rates of poverty and incarceration, which worsened notably under the presidency of Ronald Reagan, who was elected in 1981. Although "Recitatif" was written at the beginning of the Reagan era, it alludes to some of the social issues that were exacerbated during his presidency, such as an increased disparity between the quality of life of the wealthy and the poor. Meanwhile, despite the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling taking place in 1954, the 1970s and '80s saw an increase in the use of busing as a method of forcing the racial integration of schools. Although it has subsided since the 1990s, the practice of busing is still in use today.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Recitatif" was published in a period of increasing acceptance and celebration of African-American literature within global culture. This moment was preceded by several other key movements of the 20th century, such as the Harlem Renaissance, which lasted roughly from 1920-1940, and whose central literary figures included Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. Meanwhile, in the 1940s and '50s writers such as Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright explored themes of racism and segregation, thereby creating a sense of cultural momentum leading up to the Civil Rights Era of the 1960s. Following this period came the Black Arts Movement, the cultural element of the Black Power Movement. The movement was established by Imanu Amiri Baraka, who, along with his wife Amina, edited the volume *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women*, in which "Recitatif" was first published. The Black Arts Movement sought to define aesthetic principles that were separate from the white Western tradition, and to liberate black artists and writers from their dependency on white institutions such as universities and publishing houses. Some of the writers that made up the movement include Baraka, Nikki Giovani, and Maya Angelou. Although not technically part of the Black Arts Movement, Toni Morrison is often associated with it, and her work is placed firmly within the greater African-American literary tradition. As an editor at Random House in the 1960s and '70s, Morrison worked on the texts of other

African-American writers such as Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. One year before the publication of "Recitatif," Alice Walker published *The Color Purple*, which was to become one of the most widely-read novels in the African-American literary tradition.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Recitatif
- **When Published:** 1983
- **Literary Period:** Late 20th century African American fiction
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Newburgh, NY
- **Climax:** Twyla and Roberta's second argument about Maggie, during which Roberta exclaims: "Maybe I am different now, Twyla. But you're not. You're the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground."
- **Antagonist:** Big Bozo
- **Point of View:** First person, from Twyla's perspective

EXTRA CREDIT

Opera. The story's title is the French version of the word "recitative," which refers to the speech-like passages of opera in which the plot is moved forward.

One of a kind. Although Morrison has published 11 novels and multiple works of nonfiction, "Recitatif" is her only short story.

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens with Twyla's declaration that she and Roberta were brought to the orphanage of St. Bonny's because Twyla's mother (Mary) "**danced** all night" and Roberta's mother was ill. When they are initially introduced they do not get along. Mary has taught Twyla to hold prejudiced views about people of Roberta's race, but when Twyla tells this to Big Bozo (the woman in charge of the shelter), Bozo rudely dismisses her.

Eventually, the girls begin to bond over the fact that they understand each other without asking questions. They are also brought closer by the fact that they both get Fs "all the time"; Twyla can't remember anything she learns, and Roberta has not yet learned to read. They are also forced together by the fact that they are excluded from the rest of the children at St. Bonny's because they are not "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky."

Sometimes, Twyla and Roberta are picked on by the older girls (or "gar girls"), who wear makeup and seem scary but are in fact mostly vulnerable runaways. The older girls hang out in the **orchard**, where they listen to the radio and dance. Twyla often dreams of the orchard, but isn't sure why because "nothing really happened there," except one incident in which Maggie fell down there. Maggie is a "sandy-colored" old woman who works in the kitchen and has multiple disabilities. She is mute and possibly deaf, and has bow legs that cause her to rock and sway as she walks.

One Sunday, Mary and Roberta's mother come to attend a church service and lunch at St. Bonny's. Twyla and Roberta are excited about this prospect; they wear nice outfits and curl each other's hair. When Roberta introduces her mother to Twyla and Mary, however, Roberta's mother simply ignores them and walks away. Twyla is embarrassed further when Mary doesn't bring any food for them to eat, and wishes she could kill her.

The story jumps eight years ahead in time. Twyla is working at a Howard Johnson's on the Thruway. One day, when a Greyhound Bus stops at the diner, Twyla notices that Roberta is among the passengers, accompanied by two young men. Roberta is wearing an outfit and makeup "that made the big girls look like nuns." The two women have a brief, casual conversation, but Roberta appears rude and disinterested, and scoffs when Twyla accidentally reveals that she doesn't know who Jimi Hendrix is. Roberta goes to leave without saying goodbye, but before she does Twyla asks how Roberta's mother is. Roberta replies that she is fine, asks after Mary, and leaves.

The narrative jumps another twelve years forward. Twyla is now married to a man named James whose family have lived in Newburgh for generations; the couple have a son named Joseph. Despite high rates of poverty, Newburgh is simultaneously gentrifying, and a gourmet market has opened in the city. Twyla visits out of curiosity, but feels anxious at the prospect of buying anything. She eventually resolves to buy only **Klondike bars**, because both her son and father-in-law love them.

At the checkout, Twyla runs into Roberta, who is dressed elegantly and reveals that she now lives in the wealthy suburb of Annandale along with her husband and four stepchildren. Roberta suggests the two women have coffee. In the coffee shop, the women hold onto each other tightly, giggling and "behaving like sisters separated for much too long." They recall stories about their time at St. Bonny's, and Roberta shows off that she has finally learned to read.

Twyla brings up Maggie, and Roberta claims that Maggie did not fall in the orchard, but was pushed by the gar girls. Twyla doesn't believe her, but Roberta reveals that she knows because she went back to St. Bonny's twice and ran away the second time. Twyla mentions the time at Howard Johnson's when Roberta snubbed her, and Roberta blames her behavior on the racial tensions of the era. Twyla is confused, as she remembers many interracial groups of friends coming into the diner together, but brushes it off. The two women ask after

each other's mothers, promise to keep in touch, and part ways.

Twyla explains that that fall, Newburgh was overcome by "racial strife" over the issue of forced integration through busing. One day, Twyla accidentally drives past a protest against busing, where she sees Roberta holding a **sign** that reads "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!". This compels Twyla to drive back and approach Roberta. The two women have a conversation about the protest that quickly descends into fierce and petty bickering. Eventually, some of the protesting women begin to rock Twyla's car. She reaches her hand out for Roberta's help, but Roberta doesn't move.

After the women clear away, Roberta notes that she is a different person to who she was as a child, but that Twyla is the same—"the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground." Twyla, surprised, responds that Maggie wasn't black. Roberta insists that she was, and that the two of them both kicked her. The women call each other liars, and eventually Twyla comes back to join a counter-protest, at which she waves a series of signs that directly address Roberta and don't make sense to anyone else. The final sign reads: "IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?", and this seems to cause Roberta to abandon the protest. With Roberta gone, Twyla chooses not to come back either.

More time passes. It is Christmas time, and Joseph is now in college. On her way back from buying a Christmas tree, Twyla decides to stop and get a cup of coffee. Near the diner she sees a group of wealthy people in eveningwear and admits "it made me tired to look at them." Twyla goes into the diner, and here she finds Roberta, who has evidently come from the event at the hotel. Roberta asks to speak with her, and although she is resistant at first, Twyla eventually agrees.

The women briefly exchange small talk, before Roberta admits that there is something she had promised herself she would tell Twyla if the two ever met again. Roberta admits that she truly thought Maggie was black, but that she knew all along that she and Twyla did not kick her—they just watched while the gar girls did it. However, Roberta adds that she really wanted the girls to hurt Maggie, which is just as bad.

Roberta starts crying and Twyla comforts her, suspecting that Roberta is upset because she is drunk. Twyla soothes her friend by reminding her that they were only eight-year-old children who were lonely. Roberta seems to feel a little better, and Twyla asks after her mother. Roberta sadly admits that she never got better, and Twyla says Mary never stopped dancing. However, at that moment Roberta is suddenly overcome with despair again, and the story ends with her exclaiming: "Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?"

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Twyla – Twyla is the narrator of the story, and along with Roberta is its main character. She is eight years old when the story opens, and has been brought to live at St. Bonny's because her mother, Mary, "dances all night." Mary has neglected Twyla, and instilled prejudice in her daughter against people of Roberta's race (which, like Twyla's race, remains ambiguous throughout the story). Although these prejudices seem to diminish over the course of Twyla's friendship with Roberta, they occasionally resurface when the two women meet again as adults. Twyla is not a bright student, though she is marginally better than Roberta, who can't read. As a child, she is afraid of the gar girls, curious about Maggie, and affectionate toward Roberta, her only friend at St. Bonny's. However, when Mary comes to visit she experiences wild swings of emotion—she is simultaneously thrilled to see her mother, filled with shame over her behavior in chapel, and overcome with a furious desire to kill her. As a late teen, Twyla works at a Howard Johnson's and seems to quickly grow responsible and somewhat weary. Later, she marries James Benson, a man she calls "wonderful" to Roberta and privately describes as "comfortable as a house slipper," and with whom she has one son, Joseph. She is alarmed by the influx of wealth into Newburgh, and experiences stress over simple financial decisions such as buying **Klondike bars** and a Christmas tree. She is saddened by the "racial strife" that emerges in Newburgh over the issue of busing, although she does not personally have a strong opinion on the topic. However, when she sees Roberta picketing against busing, Twyla joins a counter-protest, making increasingly erratic signs that do not make sense out of the context of her and Roberta's relationship. At the end of the story, Twyla feels resentful of Roberta's accusation that the two of them kicked Maggie. However, she comes to understand that her desire to hurt Maggie was a result of her own feelings of helplessness and anger toward her mother. She ends up comforting Roberta, who is consumed by guilt over Maggie's fate.

Roberta – The other main character of the story. When Roberta arrives at St. Bonny's, she is assigned to be Twyla's roommate. The two girls are both eight years old, and one is white and one is black (though it is never made clear which is which). Roberta's mother can't look after Roberta because she is "sick"; toward the end of the story Roberta mentions that her mother was raised in an institution, which suggests that her illness is perhaps mental, rather than physical. Although Roberta seems to have been raised in a less neglectful way than Twyla (during a visit to St. Bonny's her mother brings her lots of food, where Mary brings nothing), at eight she is still unable to read. Roberta leaves St. Bonny's before Twyla, but later reveals that she returned twice after leaving—once when she was 10 and once when she was 14. When Twyla and Roberta first meet again, Roberta is dressed in a sexy, glamorous outfit, wearing lots of makeup, and smoking a cigarette. She is accompanied by two men, and the three of them are headed to an "appointment

with Hendrix." In this section of the story, Roberta is clearly a part of the rebellious youth culture of the 1960s. She is disdainful of Twyla for not knowing who Hendrix is, and seems to have embraced the hedonistic mandate of "sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll." Roberta has undergone another transformation in the final stage of the novel. When she and Twyla meet in the gourmet market, she has married a rich man, Kenneth Norton, and become the stepmother to his four children. Throughout this section of the novel she is associated with luxury; she wears elegant clothes, buys expensive items such as "asparagus and fancy water," and has a chauffeur. She also becomes a vehement opponent of forced integration, protesting the fact that her stepchildren are to be "bused" out of their neighborhood to another school. Overall, Roberta's personality is less stable than Twyla's, and she seems to have less of a secure sense of her own identity. It is also suggested that she is more flighty and self-centered than the serious, responsible Twyla, which is why it is surprising that in the very last passage, she seems so obsessed with Maggie's fate and cannot find solace in Twyla's reassurances.

Maggie – Introduced as a minor character, Maggie comes to take on a central—if mysterious—significance within the story. The children at St. Bonny's refer to her as the "kitchen woman," and Twyla's initial description of her emphasizes the fact that she is old, "sandy-colored," and bow-legged. Maggie cannot talk, and while some children claim her tongue was cut out, Twyla suspects that she has simply never been able to speak. She and Roberta test Maggie's ability to hear by calling her "Dummy!" and "Bow Legs!". While she doesn't react, Twyla is left feeling guiltily certain that she could hear them. Over the course of the story it becomes clear that the children feel angry toward Maggie on the basis of her helplessness and vulnerability. Twyla fixates on the fact that she wears "a really stupid little hat—a kid's hat with ear flaps." Later, she comes to understand the similarities between Maggie's unusual way of moving (caused by her physical disability) and Twyla's mother Mary's problem of "**dancing** all night." Like the other children, Twyla wants to hurt Maggie because Maggie represents both Mary's and Twyla's own vulnerability. Maggie becomes a point of contention between Twyla and Roberta when Roberta claims that the two of them kicked her in the **orchard** along with the gar girls. Roberta also claims that Maggie is black, a fact that Twyla disputes (along with the memory of her and Roberta kicking her). Roberta later rescinds her claim that the two children pushed Roberta, but at this point both women have been forced to confront their desire to hurt Maggie, even if they didn't actually kick her themselves. Meanwhile, Maggie's racial ambiguity reflects the women's own complicated relationship with race, including their resistance to being identified as racially oppressive or bigoted while simultaneously wanting to distance themselves from Maggie's helpless, pitiful existence.

Big Bozo – Although her official title is never revealed, Big Bozo—whose real name is Mrs. Itkin—is in charge of the shelter, and assigns Twyla and Roberta to be roommates. When Twyla mentions her mother would object to the assignment, Big Bozo replies "Good… maybe then she'll come and take you home." The children dislike Big Bozo, and Twyla notes that the only time she saw her smile was the morning that Twyla and Roberta's mothers came to visit (although this smile disappears when Twyla accidentally spills jelly beans on the floor). Years later, Roberta reveals that after the gar girls kicked Maggie in the **orchard**, Big Bozo was fired. During the protests over busing, Twyla exclaims that the mothers protesting integration are "Bozos," to which Roberta replies, "No, they're not. They're just mothers." Big Bozo represents the loveless authoritarianism that the children at St. Bonny's must endure as a result of not being raised by their own parents; however, the story suggests that sometimes real parents can be just as unpleasant.

Mary (Twyla's Mother) – Mary is Twyla's mother, who is introduced in the first sentence of the story when Twyla explains she is in St. Bonny's because "my mother **danced** all night." Throughout the story, Twyla uses this same phrase—childlike in its vague simplicity—to describe the reason why Mary can't take care of her. Its true meaning remains unclear; it is possible that Mary simply does not want to be a mother, but it's also plausible that she is a sex worker. Mary's name is ironic, as she is the opposite of the pure, self-sacrificing, morally perfect figure based on the mother of Jesus. Instead, she neglects Twyla, who at one point mentions that "Mary's idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo," and fidgets throughout the church service when she comes to visit St. Bonny's. The fact that Twyla calls her mother "Mary" as opposed to something like "Mom" indicates the skewed nature of their relationship. Even at eight, Twyla is arguably more responsible than her mother, a fact revealed when Mary visits and "smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother, not me." Twyla's feelings about her mother are decidedly mixed; she is ashamed and resentful of Mary's inappropriate outfit and the fact that she didn't bring her any food, but experiences a moment of bliss when Mary embraces her. In the latter part of the story, Twyla repeats the refrain that Mary "never did stop dancing," even as Twyla became a decidedly serious and responsible wife and mother herself.

Roberta's Mother – Unlike Mary, Roberta's mother is never named, and the details of her character remains vague. She is described as "sick," though it is unclear what she suffers from and possible that it is a mental, rather than physical, illness. When she arrives to visit Roberta at St. Bonny's, Twyla describes her as "bigger than any man," wearing an enormous cross and carrying a Bible. In contrast to Mary, Roberta's mother is deeply religious and serious. Later in the story, Roberta reveals that her mother was raised in an "institution"

and that Roberta expected to be, too. In the final scene, Roberta sadly admits that her mother never got better.

The Gar Girls (The Older Girls) – Roberta and Twyla call the teenage girls at St. Bonny's the gar girls, based on Roberta's misunderstanding of the word "gargoyles." The gar girls wear makeup, **dance** to the radio, and smoke cigarettes in the **orchard**. Roberta and Twyla are afraid of them and see them as "tough" and "mean," but Twyla observes retrospectively that they were in fact "put-out girls, scared runaways most of them. Poor little girls who fought their uncles off." The gar girls are thus a paradox of toughness and vulnerability, and illustrate how children who have suffered neglect and abuse can be misperceived as threatening. At the same time, the gar girls *are* a genuine threat, kicking Maggie to the ground and tearing her clothes. The gar girls therefore represent a cycle of abuse that Roberta and Twyla are desperate to escape.

Joseph Benson – Joseph is the son of James and Twyla. We learn little about him, other than that he doesn't seem to mind being bused to another school, prefers to watch TV rather than study at home while the schools are closed, and hangs Twyla's **sign** reading "HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?" in his room.

Jimi Hendrix – Although Jimi Hendrix does not make an active appearance in the story, Roberta and her two male friends are supposedly on their way to see him when they stop by at Howard Johnson's. Hendrix was an African-American rock musician who was hugely influential during his short career before his death at the age of 27. Associated with psychedelic rock, drugs, and 1960s counter-culture, Hendrix is a symbol of Roberta's youthful rebelliousness and glamour, which contrasts to Twyla's more sensible, ordinary life as a small-town waitress.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Kenneth Norton – Kenneth is the rich husband of Roberta and father of her four stepchildren. A widower, he comes from the wealthy suburb Annandale and works, according to Roberta, in "computers and stuff."

James Benson Twyla's husband, whom she describes as "wonderful" and "as comfortable as a house slipper." He comes from a stable family that has lived in the town of Newburgh for generations.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FRIENDSHIP VS. FAMILY

"Recitatif" chronicles the friendship of two girls, Twyla and Roberta, who meet in a shelter, St. Bonny's. The parallels between the girls—including the fact that they are the same age and that both of their mothers are alive but unable to take care of them—create a sense that they are something like twins. This is emphasized in moments when they behave in a parallel, mirroring fashion—such as when they curl each other's hair in anticipation of their mothers' visit to St. Bonny's—and when Twyla says that, on meeting again 20 years after living in St. Bonny's together, "we were behaving like sisters." The notion that Twyla and Roberta are related is majorly disrupted, however, by the fact that they are of different races. Although Morrison makes it deliberately unclear which girl is black and which is white, it is indisputable that they are not of the same race. Indeed, Twyla mentions that the other kids at St. Bonny's call them "salt and pepper," a fact that illustrates both their oppositional difference and their conjunction as a single unit.

Twyla and Roberta's familial relationship is thus perpetually out of reach, a representation the girls' desperate desire for the family that they have been denied. Their relationship is forged against the backdrop of St. Bonny's, a symbolic "family" made up of children without families of their own, as well as other socially excluded figures such as Maggie. Although the children at the institution develop familial attachments to one another, they are inescapably haunted by the absence of their birth families. Meanwhile, Roberta and Twyla are excluded on account of the fact that they are not "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky," but instead have living mothers whose flaws cannot be hidden or romanticized away.

Although both women have families of their own as adults, those families do not take up a particularly prominent place in the narrative. The story thus suggests that symbolic familial relations can be more meaningful than families in the traditional sense. Roberta and Twyla's ambivalent feelings about their own roles as mothers are conveyed by the confusion surrounding the protest over school integration. Roberta makes a **sign** reading "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO," leading Twyla to make a corresponding sign reading "AND SO DO CHILDREN"; however, Twyla soon comes to realize that her sign doesn't make sense unless read in conjunction with Roberta's. Even as an adult wife and mother, Twyla is still dependent on Roberta for a sense of identity—strong evidence of the familial nature of their relationship.

Aside from the familial overtones of their relationship, Twyla and Roberta's friendship itself is also intensely charged. They begin as enemies, predisposed to dislike each other because of racial prejudice. Although they become very close during their time at St. Bonny's, when they meet for the first time as adults their relationship is once again plagued by alienation,

misunderstanding, and resentment. Many of these issues are now rooted in differences of social class. Roberta seems to lead an exciting and glamorous life, whereas Twyla at first works as a waitress at Howard Johnson's and then marries a fireman. Although at some points in the story the women are closer than others, overall they are never quite able to overcome the social effects of their economic and racial differences.

OUTSIDERS, OUTCASTS, AND THE UNWANTED

The story's initial setting inside a shelter establishes the theme of social exclusion and alienation. The children in the shelter either no longer have parents or—like Twyla and Roberta—have parents who are unfit to take care of them. Twyla says that she and Roberta were "dumped" at St. Bonny's, and explains that the other children at the shelter refused to play with them because they were not "real orphans." Because of their mothers, Twyla and Roberta experience double exclusion; first from society, and second within an institution consisting of social outcasts. The older girls at St. Bonny's, who Twyla and Roberta call the gar girls, are described as "put-out girls, scared runaways… who fought their uncles off but looked tough to us." Here Morrison shows how the most excluded and forgotten members of society can be mistaken for "tough" and intimidating, when in fact they are extremely vulnerable.

However, the children are not the only social outcasts in St. Bonny's. Maggie, the racially ambiguous disabled woman who works in the kitchen, is arguably even more socially ostracized than the children. Bullied by the older girls, Maggie is unable to respond because she is mute and possibly deaf. She becomes a central figure in the story when Roberta claims that she and Twyla pushed and kicked her in the **orchard**. Although Roberta later takes back this statement, she remains obsessed with Maggie's fate, and the story ends with her asking "What the hell happened to Maggie?". Even though Roberta was only a child during her time at St. Bonny's—and a child in a particularly vulnerable and difficult situation—she still feels guilty and complicit in Maggie's exclusion from society.

Social exclusion is also an important element of the story's depiction of race and segregation. As adults, Roberta and Twyla find themselves on opposing sides of a protest over school integration. Roberta complains: "They want to take my kids and send them out of the neighborhood," a common objection to the "busing" method used to force school integration. Roberta wants her children to stay within her own community; however, this indirectly leads her to support segregation, which is socially exclusionary and prevents other children from receiving a high-quality education.

SICKNESS AND DISABILITY

Many people read "Recitatif" as a story whose primary theme is disability. Although the main disabled figure in the story, Maggie, at first appears to be a background character, by the end of the story she takes on a central (if still passive) role. Maggie's disabilities—she is mute and possibly deaf, with "legs like parentheses"—make her even more vulnerable than the children at St. Bonny's. She is mysterious, and the characters in the story all have different ideas about her. The other children claim her tongue was cut out, but Twyla doesn't believe them. Roberta and Twyla are also unsure whether she can hear or not, and try to test her by calling her "Dummy!" and "Bow legs!"; however, her lack of reaction is inconclusive, and Twyla is left ashamed at the possibility that Maggie could hear this cruel taunting. Later in the story, it is revealed that Roberta thinks Maggie is black, whereas Twyla thinks she is white. Maggie is thus something of a mystical, surreal figure. Twyla even wonders if "there was somebody in there after all," with "in there" referring to Maggie's body. As an adult, she looks back on the incident when Maggie fell and concludes: "Nobody inside." Because of her disability, Maggie is not considered a person with interior emotions and subjectivity.

Significantly, the children at St. Bonny's seem to blame Maggie for her disability and defenselessness. Twyla condemns her for wearing "this really stupid little hat"—a hat with earflaps that symbolize her rumored deafness and disconnection from those around her. As an adult, Roberta says that "Because she couldn't talk—well, you know, I thought she was crazy," and both Twyla and Roberta admit that even if they didn't kick Maggie, they wanted the gar girls to do so. Roberta even confesses, "I really wanted them to hurt her." For the children in the shelter, the sight of someone already suffering from a physical disability causes them to want to inflict even more pain on her. This can be read as a result of the children's own suffering and marginalization in society; they take out their own feelings of helplessness and rejection on someone who is even weaker and more vulnerable than they are.

Maggie is not the only disabled character in the story, however. In the very first sentence, Twyla declares: "My mother **danced** all night and Roberta's was sick." Roberta's mother's sickness makes her unable to take care of her daughter; this is paralleled by Twyla's mother's mysterious problem with dancing, a connection that suggests that Twyla's mother's obsession with dancing all night is itself a kind of disability that prevents her from properly performing her role as a mother. This idea is emphatically confirmed when Twyla says: "Maggie was my dancing mother… Nobody who would hear you if you cried in the night… Rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked." Maggie and Twyla's mother are linked by the unusual way they move and from their detachment from the world around them. This in turn suggests that there is something about their ways of

moving that is deemed socially inappropriate, which is also a racialized concept; throughout American history, black people have been demonized for dancing and other forms of movement associated with African culture.

CHILDHOOD VS. ADULTHOOD

The binary of childhood and adulthood is central to the story; this is first made obvious by the fact that half of the narrative is set during Twyla and Roberta's childhood, and the other half when they are adults. In the first half, Twyla and Roberta live in St. Bonny's, a world of children. Even Maggie, who is technically an adult, is presented as a child in her helplessness and her mode of dress (Twyla describes her as "dressing like a kid and never saying anything at all").

On the other hand, because of the absence of parents in their lives, the children at St. Bonny's are forced to grow up quickly, and frequently perceive themselves and each other as more adult than they really are. This is true of the gar girls, who wear makeup, dance, and intimidate the younger children, but who in retrospect Twyla recognizes were actually "scared runaways… poor little girls."

Meanwhile, Twyla and Roberta are also forced to behave like adults because their mothers are unable to properly perform the role of parents. Twyla calls her mother by her first name, Mary; when Mary comes to visit St. Bonny's, Twyla notes that "she smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother—not me." The reason why Twyla does not live with Mary is because she "**danced** all night," a detail that associates Mary with youth culture and suggests she was unable to mature enough to be a proper parent to her daughter. This fact conveys the idea that childhood and adulthood are not concrete, absolute opposites, but rather fluid states of being that people inhabit in different ways and at different points in their lives.

The binary between childhood and adulthood is also thrown into question when the story shifts to depict Twyla and Roberta as adults. The first time they meet again, Twyla is working at a diner and Roberta is hanging out with "two guys smothered in head and facial hair." Roberta smokes a cigarette and wears makeup that "made the big girls look like nuns." Both Twyla and Roberta have grown up, but in very different ways. Twyla is in a stable marriage and earning a living, whereas Roberta is sexy and glamorous, and on the way to meet Jimi Hendrix. Hendrix was an icon of the newly emergent youth culture of the 1960s, a culture that took the form of a rebellious and hedonistic reaction to the conservative pressures on young people to get married, have children, and live "sensible" lives. It is telling, therefore, that Twyla doesn't even know who Jimi Hendrix is.

When the story jumps further in time, Twyla remains in a similar position—albeit now with a son—whereas Roberta has moved to Annandale, "a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives," and has four stepchildren and two servants. Roberta's husband is rich, though she has little understanding of his career, describing it childishly as "computers and stuff." Twyla asks if Roberta ever learned to read, a fact that once again infantilizes Roberta—even though she did learn, she reveals this in a childlike manner, by reading a menu in a show-off manner.

Furthermore, Twyla and Roberta's involvement in opposing sides of a protest over forced school integration may initially be interpreted as a demonstration of their maturity and dedication to their maternal roles. However, the reality is, again, childish; the two women bicker at each other, and Twyla makes signs that nobody at the protest can understand.

The ending of the story also confirms the collapse of the distinction between childhood and adulthood. Although it is 20 years after her time at St. Bonny's, Roberta remains overcome with guilt over the bullying of Maggie, even though Maggie was an adult and the bullies were children. Memories of the past invade her present life, and it is clear that both women symbolically remain both adults and children at the same time.

RACE AND PREJUDICE

Like all of Morrison's work, "Recitatif" centers questions of racial identity, community, and prejudice. Unusually, however, the races of the three main characters are deliberately kept mysterious. The reader is told that one of Twyla and Roberta is black and the other is white, however it is unclear which is which. Meanwhile, Maggie is describes as "sandy-colored"; Roberta insists that she is black, while Twyla is sure that she is not. The ambiguity of Maggie's racial identity is a key component of her mysterious significance within the story. It is also used to show the way in which race (particularly in America) is largely an arbitrary social construction, which exists in reality mostly because of racial concepts and prejudices that originate in people's minds.

The disagreement over Maggie's race only emerges 20 years after Twyla and Roberta lived together at St. Bonny's, however even as children they both have a strong awareness of race and racism. When they first meet, Twyla is horrified at the idea of sharing a room with Roberta, "a girl from a whole other race." Later, Twyla recalls that "even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us. All kinds of kids were in there, black ones, white ones, even two Koreans." While St. Bonny's is a racially mixed environment, racial difference is clearly at the forefront of the children's minds, as is racial prejudice.

Throughout the story, Morrison offers contradictory clues about Roberta and Twyla's race that serve the purpose of confusing the reader and, in doing so, illuminating the reader's own assumptions and prejudices about race. When Twyla first

meets Roberta, she recalls Mary telling her that "they"––meaning people Roberta's race—"never washed their hair and smelled funny." Hair has a very racially charged history in the US. Negative opinions about Afro-textured hair have been a large element of anti-black racism from the slavery era into the present. Yet Mary's comment remains ambiguous. While black people do not wash their hair in the same way as white people, they also generally spend much more time caring for and styling it, so it's possible Mary's prejudice could work in either racial direction. Meanwhile, smelling "funny" is clearly a subjective notion, and betrays no concrete information beyond the fact that Mary is prejudiced against people who are not of her own race—whatever that race may be.

Morrison also manages to obscure Roberta and Twyla's races during the clash over school integration, a fact that reveals her virtuosic skill as a writer. At this point in the story, there is a distinct socioeconomic gulf between the two women; Roberta lives in a neighborhood among doctors and executives, whereas Twyla is keenly aware that half of the population of her city, Newburgh, is on welfare. However, once again this does not indicate anything definitive about either woman's race. Twyla explains that "racial strife" had come to the district where she and Roberta live, and that her own son, Joseph, was on a list of students to be bused out of his school. However, even as Twyla and Roberta argue over the policy of busing, it is not obvious what either woman thinks of racial integration in general. Furthermore, support of or opposition to integration is not necessarily indicative of a person's race, particularly when it comes to the specific issue of one's children being bused to a different school.

Morrison emphasizes the arbitrary nature of racial identity when, in the midst of their argument, Roberta and Twyla declare, in succession: "I wonder what made me think you were different." On the surface, this certainly sounds like the language of racial prejudice; both women have generally negative views of the other's race, but thought that the other woman was "different," only to supposedly be proven wrong. However, the overall sense of racial ambiguity—along with the fact that both women say the same sentence one after the other—suggests another, contradictory layer of meaning. Out of context, the sentence could be a gesture of racial conciliation: I don't know why I thought you were different. In reality, we are the same. While the differences between the women are significant, they are also a matter of arbitrary social and economic circumstance. Although race and racism are very real parts of the world we inhabit, beneath the assumption and stereotype, everyone should have the same opportunities and value as people.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

DANCE

The first sentence of the story introduces the symbol of dance, when Twyla states: "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick." In this sentence, Roberta's mother's illness is paralleled with Mary's love of dancing, such that dancing is constructed as a kind of disability or ailment. Indeed, Mary's dancing habit is framed as a condition that prevents her from performing the duties of a mother. It is possible, of course, that "dancing all night" is a code used to obscure the truth of Mary's life from the eight-year-old Twyla; in reality, Mary might be a sex worker or have another reason for giving Twyla to the shelter that she doesn't wish to reveal to her daughter.

Dancing is associated with abnormality and deviance throughout the story. The gar girls dance in the orchard to music from the radio, a detail that conveys their sexuality and rebelliousness. When explaining why she ran away from St. Bonny's during her third period living there, Roberta remarks: "I had to. What do you want? Me dancing in the **orchard**?". Dancing thus signifies an ominous future that Roberta and Twyla want to escape. Note that during the 1950s and '60s, when the first parts of the story are set, many contemporary forms of dance popular among young people were associated with deviant sexuality and immorality. This association emerges from a longer tradition of the demonization of African-American styles of dance, which white America deemed wild, hypersexual, and un-Christian.

A more metaphorical form of dancing is associated with the character of Maggie. Because of her bow legs, Maggie moves in an unusual way; according to Twyla, "she rocked when she walked." It is only later in the story that Twyla makes the explicit connection between Maggie's way of moving and her mother's dancing: "Maggie was my dancing mother… rocking, dancing, swaying as she walked." Once again, dancing is associated with disability and abnormality—in other words, the inability to function in the way deemed appropriate by society.

THE ORCHARD

"Recitatif" is filled with symbolic settings, including Twyla and Roberta's bedroom, the chapel, Howard Johnson's, the gourmet market, and the Newburgh diner. However, none is as important or meaningful as the orchard at St. Bonny's. Twyla introduces the orchard when she explains that the gar girls used to hang out and **dance** there. She goes on to observe that she used to frequently dream about the orchard. She describes it as 2-4 acres large and filled with apple trees, which were "empty and crooked like beggar women when I first came to St. Bonny's but fat with flowers when I left."

Twyla's description of the apple trees in winter makes a clear connection between the trees and Maggie, who is "crooked" because of her disability and whom Twyla describes as an empty shell with "nobody inside."

Indeed, the orchard takes on further resonance as the site of Maggie's assault by the gar girls. The orchard is thus an Edenic symbol (related to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden)—a place where childhood innocence gives way to the "sins" of cruelty, vanity, and adolescent sexuality. Twyla is too young to fully comprehend the significance of the orchard while she lives at St. Bonny's, and thus is confused as to why she dreams about it so often—"Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean." However, as Twyla grows older she is confronted with the sinister significance of the orchard and her own complicity in wanting to hurt Maggie there, and thus by the dark side of her own personality.

THE KLONDIKE BARS

Though only mentioned a handful of times, the Klondike bars Twyla buys at the gourmet market are an important signifier of her circumstances and character as an adult woman, and of the differences between her and Roberta. Twyla first travels to the market out of curiosity, and walks the aisles unable to justify spending "James' fireman's salary on anything except Klondike bars, which her son Joseph and father-in-law both love. This small detail illustrates Twyla's modest, responsible, restrained personality, as well as the extent to which her life is oriented around the desires of others.

However, even this one purchase of the Klondike bars leads to further guilt and anxiety for Twyla. Roberta suggests the two women get coffee and catch up, and Twyla's mind jumps immediately to the Klondike bars, which will melt in the car. She reprimands herself, saying it "served me right for buying all that stuff I didn't need." Once the conversation in the coffee shop sours, she thinks again of the Klondike bars, and wonders if she is childish to still care about the time when Roberta snubbed her in Howard Johnson's. This moment thus confirms the association between the Klondike bars and the fragility of Twyla's maturity and self-esteem.

PROTEST SIGNS

When the schools in Newburgh are forced to integrate through the policy of busing, Roberta and other local mothers form a protest. Here Roberta holds a sign "bigger than her mother's cross" that reads: "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!". On seeing the sign, Twyla—who has driven past the protest by chance—decides to turn around and eventually forms a counter-protest. During this period of counter-protest, Twyla makes a sign that reads "AND SO DO CHILDREN***," followed by increasingly erratic signs that only make sense in the context of her and Roberta's shared experiences.

The protest signs play an important role in the narrative, symbolizing Roberta and Twyla's transformation from powerless (and in Roberta's case, illiterate) children to adult women with the ability to publically vocalize their opinions to the world. In particular, Roberta's identification with motherhood functions as an emphatic (if perhaps unconvincing) statement of her assimilation into the adult world of wealth, influence, and responsibility.

At the same time, the signs also confirm Twyla and Roberta's fundamental incomprehensibility to the world around them. When reflecting on her friendship with Roberta, Twyla repeatedly remarks that she appreciates Roberta's ability "not to ask questions." Rather than interrogating each other, the two children simply accept the facts of each other's lives, strange as they may be. It is thus significant that Twyla makes cryptic signs that address Roberta, and Roberta alone—but displays these signs in public.

The asterisks after "AND SO DO CHILDREN***," for example, seem to point to the fact that Roberta is not technically a mother, but rather the stepmother to four children. Later, Roberta makes signs saying "HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?" and, perhaps most absurdly, "IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?". While having little to do with the protest, this question is a motif with which Roberta and Twyla end each of the conversations they have as adults. While Roberta attempts to use her signs to advertise her maturity and responsibility as an adult, Twyla's signs insistently remind her of the unstable childhoods of both women.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Leaving Home* published in 1998.

Recitatif Quotes

❝ My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick. That's why we were taken to St. Bonny's.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta's Mother, Mary (Twyla's Mother), Roberta

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 203

Explanation and Analysis

This is the opening sentence of the story. Immediately, it

highlights a connection between Roberta and Twyla through the explanation of why they are brought to St. Bonny's. This connection becomes the basis of their deep (if unstable) bond that lasts into adulthood. Meanwhile, Twyla's words also draw a parallel between Mary (Twyla's mother) and Roberta's mother, and their respective afflictions. Although we might not ordinarily think of "dancing all night" as a problem—and certainly not a condition, like an illness or disability—Twyla suggests that in this context, that is exactly what it is. Mary's tendency to "dance all night" is a metaphorical (or euphemistic) sickness or disability that prevents her from performing the duties of a normal, healthy mother.

I liked the way she understood things so fast. So for the moment it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper standing there and that's what the other kids called us sometimes. We were eight years old and got F's all the time. Me because I couldn't remember what I read or what the teacher said. And Roberta because she couldn't read at all and didn't even listen to the teacher. She wasn't good at anything except jacks, at which she was a killer: pow scoop pow scoop pow scoop.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has explained that although she and Roberta first didn't get along—a fact that was largely due to their racial difference and the prejudice that Mary had taught to Twyla—their social exclusion by the other children led the two girls to become close. Here she emphasizes this idea, noting that although she and Roberta were teased by the other kids and did not perform well in school, this brought them even closer together. At the same time, Twyla's words foreshadow the pressure that the girls' friendship will undergo as a result of their racial difference when they grow older, as she notes that "*for the moment* it didn't matter that we looked like salt and pepper." This may not matter when they are children, but it will in the future.

Twyla's claim that Roberta "wasn't good at anything except jacks" is proven to be false even within this passage. After all, Twyla begins by saying "I liked the way she understood things so fast." Far from a minor matter, this is a crucial component to Twyla and Roberta's friendship. When the women grow older, it is clear that they both feel misunderstood by the wider world, but—at least to some degree—understood by one another. However, this ease of understanding is not valued within the world of St. Bonny's in the same way as academic achievement, and Twyla and Roberta are thus left feeling that they do not have any important skills or talents.

We 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. We were dumped. Even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 204

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has continued to explain her and Roberta's transition from a place of dislike and prejudice to close friendship. Both girls perform badly in school, but bond over the fact that they understand each other without asking questions. In this passage, Twyla describes the girls' exclusion from the other children at St. Bonny's, who have a higher social status because they are "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky." Twyla repeats this childlike phrase several times throughout the story, and it serves as an illustration of the peculiar logic that dominates life at the shelter.

Whereas we might assume that Twyla and Roberta would feel lucky to not be "real orphans," Twyla's words show that the other children at St. Bonny's are able to mythologize their "beautiful dead parents" in a way that is not possible for her and Roberta. The fact that the girls must live with the reality of their mothers—each of whom suffers from their own "sickness"—lowers them in the social hierarchy to an extent that trumps racial hierarchy, shown by the fact that "even the New York City Puerto Ricans and the upstate Indians ignored us."

> I used to dream a lot and almost always the orchard was there. Two acres, four maybe, of these little apple trees. Hundreds of them. Empty and crooked like beggar women when I first came to St. Bonny's but fat with flowers when I left. I don't know why I dreamt about that orchard so much. Nothing really happened there. Nothing all that important, I mean. Just the big girls dancing and playing the radio. Roberta and me watching. Maggie fell down there once.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Maggie, The Gar Girls (The Older Girls), Roberta

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has introduced the "gar girls," the teenagers who wear makeup and dance to the radio in the orchard. She has explained that she and Roberta were afraid of the gar girls, but in this passage notes that she doesn't think of the orchard as being significant other than as a place where she and Roberta would watch the girls dancing from afar. Her description of the "empty and crooked" trees in the orchard implicitly links the orchard to Maggie, who is bow-legged and whom Twyla perceives to be a person without interior consciousness—in other words, who is "empty." The orchard can also be seen as a symbolic Garden of Eden, where Twyla and Roberta's childhood innocence is confronted with the gar girl's "sinful," sexualized behavior.

Twyla's words suggest that even though she is not consciously aware of the orchard's importance, she understands it on a subconscious, intuitive level, which is why she dreams about it even though "nothing really happened there." This foreshadows Roberta's revelation years later that Maggie didn't just "fall once" in the orchard, but was in fact pushed and kicked—an episode that becomes the emotional and moral center of the story.

> 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.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Maggie

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 206

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has described Maggie, the racially ambiguous "kitchen woman" who is bow-legged and cannot speak. Overall, Twyla's feelings about Maggie seem to range between curiosity and neutrality. However, in this passage, she takes on a more judgmental tone, expressing stern disapproval at the "stupid little hat" Maggie wears. This leads Twyla to indirectly blame Maggie for her own disability, saying "even for a mute, it was dumb... never saying anything at all." This logical slip reveals the ease with which people can come to blame those who are vulnerable for their own difference and misfortune.

Twyla does not blame Maggie for her disability outright, but is fixated on the hat as a visual manifestation of Maggie's inability to communicate with the outside world, a manifestation that—unlike Maggie's actual disabilities—Maggie chooses to wear herself. These cruel thoughts foreshadow the eventual revelation that both Twyla and Roberta wanted the gar girls to hurt Maggie, a fact that Roberta eventually claims is as bad as hurting her themselves.

> I thought if my dancing mother met her sick mother it might be good for her. And Roberta thought her sick mother would get a big bang out of a dancing one. We got excited about it and curled each other's hair.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta's Mother, Mary (Twyla's Mother), Roberta

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

During Roberta and Twyla's time at St. Bonny's, there is a visiting day during which relatives and other adults come to attend a church service and have lunch with the children. Roberta and Twyla grow excited over this prospect, imagining that their mothers will enjoy meeting one another. Like their "salt and pepper" daughters, Mary and Roberta's mother are constructed as parallel versions of each other, even as they are also opposites. Whereas Roberta's mother is sick and (as we later learn) deeply

religious, Mary's problem seems to be that she is too fun-loving and irresponsible to take care of Twyla. The girls' optimism about the prospect of their mothers meeting draws them even closer together, symbolized by the intimate, reciprocal act of curling each other's hair.

> I saw Mary right away. She had on those green slacks I hated and hated even more now because didn't she know we were going to chapel? And that fur jacket with the pocket linings so ripped she had to pull to get her hands out of them. But her face was pretty––like always––and she smiled and waved like she was the little girl looking for her mother, not me.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Mary (Twyla's Mother)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 208

Explanation and Analysis

The visiting day has arrived, and Twyla and Roberta have carefully prepared, wearing their best outfits and making baskets out of construction paper which they fill with candy. When Twyla sees Mary, however, she is overcome with embarrassment; Mary is dressed inappropriately for chapel, and wearing a fur jacket that is obviously ripped. In this moment, Twyla and her mother Mary perform a role reversal, in which Twyla becomes the sensible, disapproving mother, and Mary the giddy, frivolous little girl. This reversal foreshadows Twyla's development into a responsible (and perhaps slightly boring) adult, who is focused on creating a conventional, stable life for her family—the opposite of what her mother provided for her.

> James is as comfortable as a house slipper. He liked my cooking and I liked his big loud family. They have lived in Newburgh all of their lives and talk about it the way people do who have always known a home.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), James Benson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

This section begins the final jump in time of the story, after the incident when Twyla and Roberta meet again in Howard Johnson's. At this stage, Twyla is a 28-year-old adult, married to James and living surrounded by his family in Newburgh. James' family is a clear contrast to Twyla's upbringing, both with her erratic, fun-loving mother and the difficult—if happier—stage of life she spent at St. Bonny's. James' family is so stable that they remain consistent while the city around them changes. Meanwhile, James himself is reliable and "comfortable," providing Twyla with the consistency and solace that she did not receive from her mother as a child. Even Twyla's friendship with Roberta is defined by instability and strife, the opposite of her life with James.

> Shoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and rich. I was dying to know what happened to her, how she got from Jimi Hendrix to Annandale, a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives. Easy, I thought. Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Jimi Hendrix, Roberta

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has gone to the new gourmet market in Annandale out of curiosity, though she can only bring herself to buy Klondike bars as the other groceries are too expensive. In the checkout line, she runs into Roberta, who is dressed in elegant clothing and carrying expensive grocery items. In this passage, Twyla moves from a dazzled curiosity about Roberta's new life to a bitter resentment of Roberta on the grounds of her (unknown) race. Rather than seeing Roberta as an individual, Twyla considers her a representative of negative stereotypes about her race: "Everything is so easy for them. They think they own the world."

It may at first seem more likely that Twyla would make this statement about white people, considering the power and privilege of white people within American society. On the other hand, because of the constant mixed, ambiguous signals regarding Twyla and Roberta's races, the reader is forced to consider the possibility that Twyla is white and assumes that black people "think they own the world." This would actually cohere with anti-black racism, particularly during the latter half of the 20th century, when African Americans did experience an improvement in political rights

and social mobility. To many white racists, even this marginal progress was a sign that black people were getting too entitled and arrogant.

We went into the coffee shop holding on to one another and I tried to think why we were glad to see each other this time and not before. Once, twelve years ago, we passed like strangers. A black girl and a white girl meeting in a Howard Johnson's on the road and having nothing to say. One in a blue-and-white triangle waitress hat, the other on her way to see Hendrix. Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Jimi Hendrix, Roberta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

Having run into one another at the gourmet market, Roberta asks Twyla to join her for a coffee. Twyla briefly worries about the Klondike bars she has just bought melting in her car, but chooses not to mention them and go to the coffee shop with Roberta. Unlike the scene in Howard Johnson's, now the two women warm to each other and descend to a joyous, childlike state—"like sisters separated for much too long."

Twyla's words emphasize the fact that she and Roberta do have a familial relationship to one another, even though at other points in the story this sense of kinship has seemingly been erased by their racial and socioeconomic differences. This inconsistency is conveyed through Twyla's language. When describing their meeting in Howard Johnson's, she and Roberta are just "a black girl and a white girl" who "passed like strangers"; in Annandale, however, they are "like sisters."

You got to see everything at Howard Johnson's, and blacks were very friendly with whites in those days. But sitting there with nothing on my plate but two hard tomato wedges wondering about the melting Klondikes it seemed childish remembering the slight.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

At the coffee shop, Twyla has asked Roberta why she was rude to her when they met at Howard Johnson's 12 years earlier. Roberta has responded dismissively, saying it was because of the state of race relations at the time. This confuses Twyla, who remembers groups of friends made up of different races coming into Howard Johnson's all the time. To Twyla, this was an era of increasing racial harmony, particularly among young people—although this opinion only shows that the ability to perceive racial tensions often depends on one's particular position in society. However, rather than standing by her contrasting opinion, Twyla is embarrassed by the notion that by clinging to resentment she is behaving in a "childish" way—a state of being from which she is keen to distance herself.

Joseph was on the list of kids to be transferred from the junior high school to another one at some far-out-of-the-way place and I thought it was a good thing until I heard it was a bad thing. I mean I didn't know. All the schools seemed dumps to me, and the fact that one was nicer looking didn't hold much weight. But the papers were full of it and then the kids began to get jumpy.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Joseph Benson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla has explained that "racial strife" has come to Newburgh in the form of tensions around the policy of busing, which was used to force schools to integrate. Twyla does not have a strong opinion on the subject, even while the community around her is whipped into a frenzy. In this passage, she explains that her ambivalence is rooted in a negative opinion of schools in general. Twyla's words echo her feelings about St. Bonny's and her schooling while there, which she found difficult because she "couldn't remember what I read or what the teacher said."

Twyla notes that "all the schools seemed dumps to me," a

phrase that echoes her repeated statement that she and Roberta were "dumped" at St. Bonny's. Clearly, Twyla associates schools and other childhood institutions as places of exclusion and social abandonment. This actually connects Twyla's feelings about schooling to the issue of segregation, although this connection is not made explicit. In both cases, institutions that should provide support, resources, and tools for children become oppressive sites of social exclusion.

"Well, it is a free country."
"Not yet, but it will be."
"What the hell does that mean? I'm not doing anything to you."
"You really think that?"
"I know it."
"I wonder what made me think you were different."
"I wonder what made me think you were different."

Related Characters: Twyla, Roberta (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla and Roberta have confronted one another at the protest over busing. Twyla argues that there is nothing wrong with busing, whereas Roberta is outraged by the policy. The women's argument—which is theoretically about a complex political issue—then descends into childlike bickering. Both women make vague, ambiguous statements, such that it is easy for the reader to lose track of who is saying what—an effect that coheres with the racial ambiguity hanging over the entire story.

This sense of ambiguity is emphasized in the moment when both women say one after another, "I wonder what made me think you were different." Like an optical illusion, this statement could have two completely different meanings depending on the context in which it appears. In the midst of Twyla and Roberta's argument, it betrays a logic typical of racist ideology; the idea that any likeable member of a despised race is an exception, "different" to the rest of their race. However, if approached from another angle, the sentence could convey an understanding that race is in fact an arbitrary social construction, and that beneath racial distinctions everyone has the same value. This is significant in light of the trajectory of Roberta and Twyla's friendship, as the women did start off by thinking the other was "different," but came to realize (at least as children) that they were in fact as similar as sisters.

"They're just mothers."
"And what am I? Swiss cheese?"
"I used to curl your hair."
"I hated your hands in my hair."

Related Characters: Twyla, Roberta (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla and Roberta have continued to argue at the protest. Although they are supposedly debating the policy of busing, their comments have grown increasingly vicious and personal. Twyla exclaims that the women protesting busing along with Roberta are "Bozos," referring to the bossy and authoritarian woman who was in charge St. Bonny's. Roberta disagrees, saying they are "just mothers," which Twyla then interprets as a personal insult.

Things get even more personal when the topic turns to hair, and the intimate act of curling each other's hair before their mothers came to visit. This is a particularly charged example because of the racial tensions surrounding hair. In the US, Afro-textured hair has often been demonized as "dirty" and "unprofessional," and the world of black hair styles and care is largely obscured from white people. Thus for a black person to invite a white friend to curl their hair is a particularly intimate act of trust.

I brought a painted sign in queenly red with huge black letters that said, IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?. Roberta took her lunch break and didn't come back for the rest of the day or any day after. Two days later I stopped going too and couldn't have been missed because nobody understood my signs anyway.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Roberta's Mother, Roberta

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

Although she earlier stated that she didn't have a strong opinion on busing, Twyla has joined a counter-protest motivated by her argument with Roberta. She makes protest signs that address Roberta directly, and become increasingly strange and difficult for anyone except for Roberta to understand. Her final sign, reading "IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?", has nothing to do with busing at all and instead takes the form of the refrain with which she and Roberta have ended most of their conversations as adults—by asking about each other's mothers.

Twyla's words in this passage convey the sense that while Roberta has assimilated into a group of others who feel able to vocalize their opinions about political issues affecting their families, Twyla remains an outsider who cannot effectively communicate with others. Her statement that she "couldn't have been missed because nobody understood my signs anyway" can be read at both a literal and metaphorical level. In the metaphorical sense, it implies that Twyla feels like a perpetual outcast and unwanted member of society because of her inability to be "read" and understood by those around her—with the one exception of Roberta.

❝ 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. 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 rough-housing, I knew she wouldn't scream, couldn't—just like me—and I was glad about that.

Related Characters: Twyla (speaker), Maggie, The Gar Girls (The Older Girls)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 225

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of an argument partly about busing, Roberta has revealed that Maggie didn't fall down in the orchard, but was pushed and kicked by the gar girls. Roberta has also claimed that she and Twyla joined in with this kicking, but in this passage Twyla concludes (after some deliberation) that this is false. However, this moment of realization is not about exonerating herself from blame over Maggie's suffering. Rather, Twyla suddenly comes to understand the true nature of her feelings about Maggie and why, even though she didn't push Maggie herself, she wanted the gar girls to hurt her.

To the young Twyla, Maggie is symbolic of both her mother, Mary, and herself. Like Mary, Maggie has an unusual way of walking that causes her to "dance" and attracts negative attention from others. Similarly, Mary's habit of dancing is framed as a kind of disability when Twyla compares it to Roberta's mother's illness, and uses it as the justification for why Mary cannot take care of her. At the same time, Maggie's inability to speak is a reflection of Twyla's own powerlessness as a child living at the shelter. As a result of having a neglectful mother, Twyla prematurely developed an adult sense of responsibility and maturity. However, she had no "voice" with which to articulate this, and if she "cried in the night," there was no mother there to hear her. As a result, Maggie becomes a symbol of Twyla's painful frustrations toward Mary and toward herself, a frustration so powerful that it verges on violence.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Roberta (speaker), The Gar Girls (The Older Girls), Twyla

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 226-227

Explanation and Analysis

Twyla and Roberta have accidentally run into each other again, this time in a diner where Twyla is stopping for a coffee on her way home, and where Roberta has gone after attending a luxurious ball at the Newburgh Hotel. Although Twyla is resistant to talking to Roberta, Roberta insists that she needs to tell Twyla something. In this passage, she reveals that her claim that she and Twyla kicked Maggie was false, but that she wanted to do it badly, which ultimately

means the same thing: "wanting to is doing it."

Note that this is the same realization—it even uses some of the same language—that Twyla experienced in the previous scene. Both women understand that although they did not take part in beating up Maggie, they watched the gar girls do it not only without intervening, but even hoping that they would hurt her. However, unlike Twyla, Roberta has not fully grasped why she wanted this to happen. In other words, she cannot see that her desire to hurt Maggie was a manifestation of her own frustration, anger, and fear as a vulnerable child living without her mother in the shelter. As a result, Roberta is far less forgiving of herself than Twyla managed to be.

"Did I tell you? My mother, she never did stop dancing." "Yes. You told me. And mine, she never got well." Roberta lifted her hands from the tabletop and covered her face with her palms. When she took them away she really was crying. "Oh, shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?"

Related Characters: Roberta, Twyla (speaker), Maggie, Roberta's Mother, Mary (Twyla's Mother)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

Roberta has become hysterically upset over the incident with Maggie, and Twyla has attempted to comfort her, telling her that they were just children. In an effort to distract her, Twyla returns to a consistent refrain in the women's relationship: their habit of asking about each other's mothers. At first this seems to help, however the last words of the story are in the form of Roberta's sudden exclamation: "What the hell happened to Maggie?" As a result, the story ends on a climactic, unresolved note. While Twyla has been able to move on from the incident with Maggie and does not seem to feel guilty about it, Roberta remains fixated.

Meanwhile, Roberta's question also speaks directly to the reader, and raises two possible lines of inquiry. One refers to the episode in the orchard, and brings up the unresolved issues of what took place. Why did the gar girls kick her? Why did no one intervene? Why was Big Bozo fired, and was it a direct result of what happened to Maggie? However, the more obvious reading points to the question of Maggie's ultimate fate. While both Roberta and Twyla have overcome their traumatic childhoods and achieved relative success in life, Maggie's circumstances remain completely unknown. She is a lost character, an outcast within the narrative. The question of her fate is only raised at the very end of the story, when it is too late to receive an answer.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

RECITATIF

Twyla, the narrator, explains that she and Roberta were in a shelter called St. Bonny's because Twyla's mother "**danced** all night" and Roberta's mother was "sick." Twyla says that people often feel pity for her when they learn she was in a shelter, but that it wasn't that bad. She and Roberta shared a room with four beds, and the two girls slept in a different bed every night.

Immediately, Twyla establishes a parallel between her mother's dancing and Roberta's mother's illness, both of which are ailments that prevent them from fulfilling their role as parents. Their children, meanwhile, are resilient, finding opportunities for play despite the odds.

The relationship between the two girls, however, did not get off to a good start. Twyla admits that when she found out she would have to share a room with "a girl from a whole different race," she felt "sick to my stomach." Her mother, Mary, had told her that people of Roberta's race never washed their hair and "smelled funny." Twyla tells "Big Bozo," the woman who runs the orphanage, that Mary would object to Twyla sharing a room with Roberta. Big Bozo responds dismissively and tells the girls that if they fight, they won't be allowed to watch *The Wizard of Oz* later on.

Morrison challenges conventional understandings of race and racism by presenting Mary and Twyla's racism in a nonspecific way. The reader cannot be sure if they are prejudiced toward white people or black people, a fact that points to the arbitrary social construction of race and racism in the first place. This in turn forces the reader to confront their own assumptions and prejudices about race.

After Big Bozo leaves, Roberta asks Twyla if her mother is sick too; Twyla responds that her mother (Mary) isn't sick, but "just likes to dance all night." Twyla likes the way that Roberta seems to understand her easily; this is true even though both children perform badly in school and Roberta cannot read. Twyla mentions that the only thing Roberta was good at was jacks. Although the two girls didn't like each other at first, they were rejected by the other children because they weren't "real orphans with beautiful dead parents in the sky." Twyla recalls that there were children of many different races at St. Bonny's, but that all of them refused to play with her and Roberta.

Although Roberta cannot read and thus is obstructed from understanding much of the world around her, she has a particular talent for understanding Twyla. The girls' connection is fused through their exclusion by the rest of the children at the shelter, which is representative of the broader exclusion the children at St. Bonny's face as poor, parentless, and vulnerable figures in a world filled with "normal" families.

Twyla notes that she loved the food at St. Bonny's, particularly because her own mother's "idea of supper was popcorn and a can of Yoo-Hoo." She explains that sometimes she and Roberta were tormented by the older teenage girls at the shelter, who wore makeup and seemed intimidating but were actually (in retrospect) "scared runaways… poor little girls." The older girls would play music on the radio and dance in the **orchard**, and if they caught Roberta and Twyla watching them they'd chase after them and "pull our hair and twist our arms."

The children at St. Bonny's act tough, but Morrison continuously drops reminders of the neglect and abuse they have suffered in their homes. While Twyla has some understanding of the fact that the older girls are also vulnerable, she cannot afford to seem as such because they are cruel to her. Throughout the story, vulnerable people often take out their anger and fear on those who are weaker than them.

Twyla recalls that she would often dream about the **orchard**, although she's not sure why. She claims "nothing really happened there," aside from the older girls dancing. She adds that "Maggie fell down there once," and explains that Maggie was a bow-legged woman who worked in the kitchen at St. Bonny's. When she fell, the older girls laughed at her, and Twyla was too afraid of them to help her.

Twyla's statement that she dreamed about the orchard establishes it as an important symbol in the story, even if Twyla herself is not consciously aware of its significance yet. The orchard's meaning is steadily revealed as it troubles her conscience in later passages.

Twyla explains that Maggie couldn't talk; although some of the children say she had her tongue cut out, Twyla doesn't believe them. Twyla recalls that she was "old and sandy-colored," with "legs like parentheses" that made her walk in a distinctive, rocking manner. She wore a "stupid little hat—a kid's hat with earflaps." Twyla asks Roberta if Maggie can scream, worrying what would happen if someone tried to kill her; Roberta says that Maggie could only cry inaudibly. One day the two girls attempt to prove whether or not Maggie can hear them by calling her "Dummy!" and "Bow legs!". Although Maggie does not react, Twyla later guiltily wonders if she could in fact hear them.

In some ways, Maggie's disabilities seem to be reflections of the issues facing those around her. Like the children at St. Bonny's who do not have any power or agency within their own lives, Maggie cannot communicate, and thus ends up a passive presence who cannot fight the horrible things done to her. Similarly, the way she walks connects her to Mary's dancing, which Twyla then subconsciously turns into a "disease" by comparing it to Roberta's mother's illness. As with the two main characters, Maggie's race is left ambiguous, described only as "sandy-colored."

Twyla recalls that Big Bozo was "disappointed" in her and Roberta, because they were the only children at St. Bonny's who had been "dumped" by their mothers and who got "F's in three classes including gym." However, Twyla and Roberta got along well. Twyla recalls that "the day before Maggie fell down" the girls found out their mothers were coming to visit on the same day. They look forward to the visit, excited by the prospect of their mothers meeting. On the day of the visit, Roberta wears a special pair of socks even though they have not yet dried after being washed, and each girl brings a homemade construction paper basket filled with candy.

Like the other children at St. Bonny's, Twyla and Roberta put on a tough exterior. Yet the scene in which they prepare for their mothers' arrival shows them to be what they really are: eight-year-old children. Without their mothers around, Twyla and Roberta are forced to behave like adults, but despite the ambivalent feelings that Twyla in particular holds toward her mother, when preparing to see her again she slips into the role of a young daughter.

The other visitors who arrive at St. Bonny's are frightening, predatory adults—"the old biddies who wanted servants and the fags who wanted company." Twyla reflects that if any of the children actually had a relative capable of taking care of them, "they wouldn't be real orphans." Twyla is upset upon seeing that her mother, Mary, is wearing a pair of green slacks that Twyla dislikes and considers inappropriate for the church service they are about to attend. Mary embraces Twyla, squishing the paper basket and exclaiming "Twyla, baby. Twyla, baby!". Twyla is furious, knowing that the other children will tease her about this. At the same time, she is also happy, and wants to "stay buried in her fur all day."

Mary represents everything that a mother in the 1950s is not supposed to be. She is dressed in a cheap, gaudy fashion, and behaves in a childish way. While this embarrasses Twyla, it does not seem to make her love Mary any less—at least not in a deep sense. The fur that Mary wears in this scene connects to the (much more expensive) fur coat Roberta wears in the final scene of the story.

Twyla is so happy to see Mary that she briefly forgets about Roberta, until Roberta comes to introduce her mother to Twyla and Mary. Roberta's mother is "bigger than any man," wearing an enormous cross and carrying a huge Bible. Mary tries to shake Roberta's mother's hand, but Roberta's mother simply walks away, causing Mary to exclaim, "That bitch!". Everyone in the chapel turns to stare at her. Mary is unable to concentrate during the service, groaning and checking her lipstick in a hand mirror. Twyla remembers thinking "she really needed to be killed." She imagines the "real orphans were looking smug."

Like Maggie and Mary, Roberta's mother carries her "abnormality" within her very physical presence. Everything about her is larger-than-life, making her seem like a somewhat mythical, unreal figure. At the same time, we never learn her name or hear a single word she says; her personality, along with her illness, remain a mystery throughout the story. The only thing that is clear is that she is the opposite of Mary.

Mary hasn't brought anything to eat for lunch, and Twyla again thinks, "I could have killed her." Roberta's mother, meanwhile, brought a large array of food; Roberta brings Twyla some graham crackers after the mothers leave, and Twyla thinks that she must be sorry that her mother snubbed Mary. She appreciates the fact that Roberta does not mention Mary's behavior during chapel.

Throughout most of the story, Twyla does not vocalize any feelings of resentment toward her mother for neglecting her. However, in this scene Twyla's feelings of disappointment and shame emerge in a sudden and violent fashion, and she repeats three times that she wishes she could kill her mother.

Roberta leaves St. Bonny's in May, and on her last day she and Twyla sit in the **orchard** and watch the older girls **dance** and smoke. Roberta seems "sort of glad and sort of not" to be going home. Twyla thinks she will die in the room with four beds without her, but also knows that Big Bozo is planning to "move some other dumped kid" to be Twyla's roommate. Roberta promises to write to Twyla every day, even though she cannot read. After Roberta leaves, her memory fades in Twyla's mind.

Later in the story we learn that this is the day in which the gar girls kick Maggie in the orchard. However, on the day itself Twyla is more focused on Roberta's imminent departure. Although the relationships formed at St. Bonny's are like familial bonds, they are precarious. As a result, Twyla learns to move on quickly from the loss of her "sister."

The story jumps forward eight years in time. Twyla is working at a Howard Johnson's diner, which is far from where she lives in Newburgh, but not a bad job. She notes that the diner looks better at night, "more like shelter." It is August and a Greyhound bus has just stopped at the diner. Suddenly, Twyla sees Roberta, who is smoking a cigarette and accompanied by two men with excessive facial hair. Roberta is wearing an outfit and makeup that "made the big girls look like nuns." At the end of her shift, Twyla approaches her, wondering if Roberta will remember her and noting that she herself never talks about St. Bonny's to anyone.

At this point, Twyla and Roberta's lives have progressed in drastically different directions. Twyla lives an ordinary, modest, sensible life, in which the only excitement comes via the Greyhound buses that stop at Howard Johnson's. Roberta, meanwhile, is a typical example of the members of the rebellious youth culture of the 1960s. Her makeup, outfit, and male companions are a far cry from the fervent religiosity of her absent mother.

Twyla reintroduces herself, and Roberta remembers her. They exchange small talk, and Roberta lets out "a private laugh that included the guys but only the guys." Twyla feels self-conscious in her waitress uniform. She expects Roberta to invite her to sit with them, but instead Roberta tells her that they are on the way to see Hendrix. Twyla responds enthusiastically, asking what "she is doing now." Roberta clarifies that she meant "Jimi Hendrix, asshole." She goes to leave without saying goodbye, and Twyla asks after Roberta's mother. Roberta says she is "fine" and Twyla says that Mary is "pretty as a picture." Roberta leaves and Twyla again thinks about how ugly the Howard Johnson's is in the light.

Twyla attempts to connect with Roberta over Roberta's current interests; however, Twyla is too disconnected from the youth culture of which Roberta is a part, and thus this attempt fails. As a result, Twyla resorts to connecting through the issue that first brought the two girls together: their mothers. Although Roberta reacts flippantly in this instance, asking after each other's mother will become a habit for Twyla and Roberta. They end almost every conversation in the rest of the story with this refrain.

The narrative jumps years ahead again. Twyla says her husband, James, is "as comfortable as a house slipper." His family have always lived in Newburgh and consider the town an "upstate paradise," even though half its residents are now on welfare. On the other hand, the town is also changing; wealthy executives are moving in, and people are buying run-down houses and renovating them. A gourmet store opens, and Twyla makes a trip there out of curiosity, but the only item she can bring herself to buy are **Klondike bars**. She notes that both her father-in-law and her son (Joseph) love them.

The narrative has jumped ahead in time, and Twyla has gone further down the path of an ordinary, working-class life. Note that James' family are in many ways the opposite to Twyla and Roberta's tumultuous upbringings; they are "normal," close, and so stable that they don't even notice the extent to which their surroundings have changed.

Suddenly Twyla hears Roberta call out her name. Roberta is "dressed to kill," wearing diamonds and a white dress and holding asparagus and "fancy water." At first Twyla corrects her, saying "I'm Mrs. Benson," before realizing that the woman is Roberta. Roberta clarifies that she lives in Newburgh too, in an area called Annandale, "a neighborhood full of doctors and IBM executives." Twyla remembers the moment 12 years earlier in Howard Johnson's, still feeling hurt and wondering how Roberta has gone from going to see Jimi Hendrix to living in a fancy suburb.

Once again, Roberta has undergone a total transformation. Her clothes and groceries indicate that she is now wealthy, but still do not determine her race. Note that while the women now live in the same town, they are divided by economic (and likely also racial) segregation. While as children they were equals in their exclusion, there is now a distinct divide between Twyla and Roberta.

Roberta explains that the man she married a year ago, Kenneth Norton, is from Annandale. Twyla says that she is married to James Benson, whom she describes as "wonderful." She tells Roberta that she has one son, and Roberta replies that her husband is a widower and she has four stepchildren. Roberta asks if Twyla has a moment to get a coffee, and Twyla briefly considers that the **Klondike bars** will melt in her car, before concluding that this "served me right for buying all that stuff I didn't need." She sees that Roberta's car is being driven by a Chinese chauffeur, and the two women laugh imagining what Big Bozo would think if she could see them now.

Once again, this scene reveals the stark divide between Twyla and Roberta that has been created by their respective socioeconomic circumstances. Whereas Roberta seems not to be in a rush and has a chauffeur to drive her around, Twyla fixates on the simple purchase of Klondike bars. This difference is symbolized in the event of the Klondike bars melting, something that worries Twyla but which she is assumedly too embarrassed to bring up in front of Roberta.

Twyla reflects that it feels as if 20 years have disappeared and she and Roberta are children again. She recalls the teenage girls at St. Bonny's, who they called the gar girls (based on a misunderstanding of the word gargoyles). Going into the coffee shop, she and Roberta hold each other and act "like sisters." Twyla says that although she and Roberta only lived together for four months as children, they connected because they both knew how not to ask questions and instead simply understood each other, a skill that distinguished them from the rest of the world.

Throughout the story the characters are often fooled by surface appearances, and are unable to see what is beneath. This is true of the gar girls, whom Twyla and Roberta perceive to be tough and scary but are actually vulnerable. However, when Twyla and Roberta are together (at this point at least) they suddenly revert to a childlike state that seems to be closest to the truth of who they really are.

Twyla asks Roberta if she ever learned to read, and Roberta triumphantly reads the menu aloud. They recall details from their time at St. Bonny's, and Twyla asks what ended up happening with Jimi Hendrix, but Roberta doesn't respond. Instead, she tells Twyla about her husband, Kenneth, and their two servants. Twyla asks Roberta if she remembers the time when Maggie fell down and the gar girls laughed at her. Roberta gravely responds that Maggie didn't fall—the gar girls pushed her in the **orchard** on purpose and ripped her clothes.

The juxtaposition of Roberta's statement that she now has servants and the discussion about Maggie suggests that Roberta may feel a greater sense of guilt because of her current privileged position in society. Unlike Twyla, Roberta is less forgiving of the gar girls, and instead is horrified by the fact that they chose to push and kick Maggie, who is totally vulnerable because of her disabilities. Also note that even though Roberta is finally literate, she shows off her ability in a childish manner.

Twyla has no recollection of Maggie being pushed, but Roberta insists that this is what happened and that she and Twyla had been frightened. Roberta continues that Big Bozo was fired, which she knew because she returned to St Bonny's twice after leaving. During the second time, when she was 14, she ran away to avoid ending up "**dancing** in the **orchard**." Twyla is still in disbelief that Maggie was pushed, and asked Roberta who her roommates were when she returned. Roberta replies that they were "creeps" who "tickled themselves in the night."

Roberta's desperation to avoid becoming one of the girls "dancing in the orchard" seems incoherent with her appearance in Howard Johnson's, during which Twyla notes that "she made the big girls look like nuns." Perhaps Roberta's fear was less of dressing up and dancing, and more of becoming morally corrupt, trapped in the shelter—the kind of person capable of pushing Maggie.

Suddenly Twyla decides she wants to go home, and feels angry at Roberta for not apologizing for the incident at Howard Johnson's. She asks Roberta if she was "on dope" when they last met, and Roberta replies that it's possible, but that her frostiness was just how things were then—"black—white." Twyla disagrees, recalling how young white and black people would get off the bus and come into Howard Johnson's together. However, she remembers the **Klondike bars** and feels childish for still feeling insulted. The women promise to "keep in touch this time," and as they are saying goodbye once again ask about each other's mothers. Twyla says Mary never stopped **dancing**, and Roberta sadly admits that Roberta's mother never got well. After Roberta goes, Twyla wonders if it's possible Roberta is right about Maggie.

Once again, Morrison manages to depict racial tension between the two women without actually revealing which of them is white and which is black. In doing so, she shows how both black people and white people can be dissuaded from interacting with others of a different race on account of broader tensions around them. Twyla's contrasting opinion—that the 1960s were a time of racial mixing and (relative) harmony, at least among young people—shows that the ability to perceive racial tensions often depends on one's particular position in society.

The narrative jumps ahead to the fall, when Newburgh is afflicted by "racial strife." Twyla imagines this strife in the form of an enormous prehistoric bird watching and screeching at the neighborhood from the sky. Twyla knows she is supposed to feel bad about the strife, but isn't sure what she thinks and receives no help figuring it out from James. Their son, Joseph, is on a list of students to be bused to another school, though Twyla doesn't see a substantial difference between the schools. She forgets about the whole issue until one day when she drives past a school about to be integrated and sees Roberta carrying a **sign** that reads: "MOTHERS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!"

Twyla's ambivalence over the policy of busing can be interpreted in multiple ways. It is possible that she is open-minded, isn't upset by the prospects of racial integration, and believes it is okay for Joseph to be bused to a different neighborhood in service of the greater good. It could also be that, as a working-class person, she feels less politically influential and entitled to voice her opinion that her more affluent neighbors in Annandale. Finally, it is also conceivable that she is simply apathetic.

Roberta approaches Twyla, and the two women quickly realize that both their children are on lists to be bused. However, where Twyla feels indifferent about this, Roberta is furious. The two women argue vaguely over forced integration, and their words sound nasty and childish. Twyla looks at the other picketing mothers, complaining that they are "swarming all over the place like they own it" and claiming that they are "Bozos." Roberta replies that they are in fact "just mothers," and the women begin bickering again.

In contrast to the moment in the coffee shop when Twyla and Roberta reverted back to a joyous, harmonious version of their former selves, here the two women are polarized by their opposing adult identities. Whereas Twyla perceives Roberta as entitled and demanding, Roberta implies that Twyla is not performing her role as a mother correctly by snapping that the "Bozos" (connecting to the woman Roberta and Twyla both feared and disliked as children) are "just mothers."

The picketing women surround Twyla's car and begin rocking it, and Twyla instinctively reaches for Roberta, "like the old days in the **orchard**." Roberta, however, does not take Twyla's hand, but simply watches. Eventually, the police force the women to disperse, though Roberta remains staring at Twyla. She tells Twyla that she might be different now, but that Twyla is the same—"the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady." Roberta claims it is hypocritical for Twyla to call her a bigot, considering she kicked Maggie. Twyla is confused, as she is sure that Maggie wasn't black. She says this to Roberta, who responds "like hell she wasn't," and repeats that they kicked her, reminding Twyla that Maggie "couldn't even scream." The two women accuse each other of being liars before parting ways.

The moment that Twyla reaches for Roberta's hand again emphasizes that beneath their differences in the present, the intense connection of their childhood endures. On the other hand, that connection is not absolute, but fragile, as Roberta's lack of reaction shows. Roberta's claim to have changed while Twyla is "the same" indicates the extent to which both women want to distance themselves from their childhoods. However, as much as their external circumstances have changed, the argument over Maggie's race proves how difficult it is for either woman to leave St. Bonny's behind.

The next day, Twyla makes a **sign** that reads "AND SO DO CHILDREN****." She arrives outside the school and joins a newly formed counter-protest. On the first day, the two groups are "dignified," ignoring those on the opposing side. The next day the women call each other names and make obscene gestures. Twyla realizes that her sign doesn't make sense without Roberta's; she also notes that Roberta was ignoring her and possibly didn't notice she was there. The next day, when Roberta raises her sign reading "MOTHER HAVE RIGHTS TOO!", Twyla immediately holds up a new sign she has made, reading "HOW WOULD YOU KNOW?".

Although Twyla is theoretically counter-protesting the issue of busing, the real reason why she attends the protest is evidently to communicate with Roberta (recall that before seeing Roberta, she had little opinion on the topic). For this reason, she addresses her signs directly to her childhood friend, which baffles the other protesters. Once again, Twyla and Roberta are shown to be at odds with—and incomprehensible to—the world around them.

Days pass, and Twyla continues to make "crazier" **signs** that no one can understand, including one that reads "IS YOUR MOTHER WELL?". Roberta leaves the protest and doesn't come back; eventually, Twyla does the same. Classes are suspended for six weeks. Twyla attempts to tutor Joseph at home, but he and the other children in the neighborhood can't concentrate and just end up watching TV. When the schools open again, there are fights and sirens heard in the streets. Joseph takes one of Twyla's signs and hangs it in his bedroom, and Twyla's father-in-law uses another to cut fish on.

Twyla's strange signs suggest that she cares more about her relationship with Roberta than her identity as a mother. Although surprising, this also makes sense; Twyla and Roberta became like "sisters" to one another, and as such each girl formed a sense of their own identity through the other. As a result, Twyla depends on her attachment to Roberta—an attachment that proves painful because of its instability.

Twyla looks for Roberta at Joseph's graduation, but doesn't see her. She continues to dwell on the question of whether or not Maggie was actually black. Suddenly it occurs to Twyla that she and Roberta both know the truth, which is that they didn't kick Maggie but wanted to. Twyla determines that "Maggie was my **dancing** mother," and that both women had "nobody inside." She draws a parallel between Maggie's disabilities and Mary's inability to perform her duties as a mother; she then compares Maggie's silence and helplessness with her own.

Twyla's breakthrough in this moment shows that she understands the complexity of her own emotions better than Roberta does. She is able to realize that her anger at Maggie was in fact displaced anger at her own mother, as well as frustration at her own vulnerability as a metaphorically "voiceless" child caught up in a situation beyond her control.

After some deliberation over whether or not to get a Christmas tree, Twyla decides that she wants to, and on her way back from buying it she drives past the Newburgh hotel. She sees a crowd of rich men and women in luxurious clothing, and observes that it makes her "tired to look at them." On the next corner there is a diner, where she decides to stop for a cup of coffee. There she sees Roberta, wearing an elegant evening gown and fur coat and accompanied by two other people who look a little drunk. Roberta tells the other two to wait for her in the car and she sits in a booth with Twyla.

The opening of this scene presents a stark view of socioeconomic inequality; while Roberta is dressed luxuriously and seemingly oblivious to her class privilege, it makes Twyla tired just to look at rich people. The fur coat Roberta wears in this scene can be seen as a connection to the fur Mary wears in the chapel scene. Whereas Mary looked cheap and inappropriate, Roberta is the picture of elegance.

Roberta tells Twyla that she resolved to tell her something if the two of them ever met again. Twyla is resistant, but Roberta explains that it's "about St. Bonny's and Maggie." Roberta insists that she really used to think Maggie was black, but now isn't sure. She explains that she thought Maggie was crazy because she couldn't talk, and that Maggie was brought up in an institution like Roberta's mother was (and where Roberta assumed she also would be).

Note that where Twyla connects Maggie to her mother because of Mary's physical "condition," Roberta makes a parallel gesture, associating Maggie with her own mother because the two women both seem to suffer from psychological illnesses.

Roberta confesses that Twyla was right, that it was only the gar girls who kicked Maggie. However, Roberta adds that she wanted to kick her, and "wanting to is doing it." Twyla tries to console Roberta, telling her that they were only eight-year-old children. The two women agree that they were both "lonely" and "scared." Twyla asks if she told Roberta that Mary "never did stop dancing." Roberta responds that her own mother never got better. Suddenly she begins sobbing more intensely, and exclaims: "What the hell happened to Maggie?"

Roberta comes to the exact same conclusion as Twyla did at the end of the previous scene, realizing that her desire to hurt Maggie was born out of her own sense of frustration and vulnerability. Unlike Twyla, however, Roberta is not able to forgive herself for this. Although she is momentarily consoled, her final words suggest that she will not yet be able to find peace with her desire to see Maggie suffer.

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