ULUSLARARASI DİL, EDEBİYAT VE KÜLTÜR ARAŞTIRMALARI DERGİSİ

udekad

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND CULTURE RESEARCHES

МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ ЖУРНАЛ ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИХ, ЛИТЕРАТУРОВЕДЧЕСКИХ И КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИХ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЙ

Cilt: 5, Sayı: 2, 2022

Vol: 5, Issue: 2, 2022

Sayfa – Page: 176-185

E-ISSN: 2667-4262

INITIATION, RACE RELATIONS AND OTHERNESS IN TONI MORRISON'S "RECITATIF"

TONİ MORRİSON'UN "RECİTATİF" İSİMLİ ÖYKÜSÜNDE İNİSİASYON, IRK İLİŞKİLERİ VE ÖTEKİLİK

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ARTICLE INFO

Received: *15.11.2022*

Accepted: *27.12.2022*

Keywords:

Initiation, Initiation story, African American Literature, Race, Otherness.

Research Article

ABSTRACT

The moments of change marking transformation from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to experience and gaining knowledge about the self and the world in general have been seen as of significance across cultures. Correspondingly, literature, art in general, has engaged closely with this ritualistic, threshold experience. Foregrounding a moment of change and centering its plot around at least one young adolescent or child, initiation stories, or more commonly known as stories of coming of age, narrativize the theme of growing up or at least one, major character's realization of a truth about him/herself as well as the life and the world condition. Despite the prevalence of initiation theme in literature and the significant attempts made by literary studies scholars to theorize what constitutes an initiation story especially until a few decades ago, more recent scholarship, Anglophone literary studies at least, has dealt less considerably with initiation as a frame of reference in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. The present study reconsiders the theme of initiation in literature through Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" and examines how the short story deviates from the patterns of traditional initiation stories. It is argued that Morrison interestingly brings together the issue of initiation with concepts such as race relations and otherness, which calls for a more dynamic, relational and intersubjective understanding of the term.

MAKALE BİLGİSİ

Geliş: *15.11.2022*

Kabul: *27.12.2022*

Anahtar Kelimeler:

İnisiasyon, Erginlenme, Afrikan Amerikan Edebiyatı, Irk, Ötekilik.

Araştırma Makalesi

ÖZET

Çocukluktan yetişkinliğe, masumiyetten tecrübeye geçişe, kişinin kendisi ve yaşadığı dünya hakkında bilgi edinmesine işaret eden değişim ya da inisiasyon (erginlenme) ritüellerine tarih boyunca farklı kültürlerde büyük önem atfedilmiştir. Bu duruma bağlı olarak, edebiyat, genel olarak sanat, insanın bir halden diğerine geçişindeki bu ritüelle yakından ilgilenmiştir. Özellikle bir değişim anını ön plana çıkararak olay örgüsünü en az bir ergen ya da çocuk karakter etrafında temerküz eden inisiasyon öyküleri ya da daha yaygın adıyla reşit olma öyküleri (ing. *coming of age*), erginlenme temasını ya da kişinin kendisi veya yaşadığı hayat ve dünyaya dair önemli bir gerçeği fark etmesini konu edinir. Edebi eserlerde erginlenme temasının yaygınlığına ve özellikle yakın bir zamana kadar bu türü kuramsallaştırmak için edebiyat araştırmacılarının yaptığı önemli çalışmalara rağmen, son dönem edebiyat çalışmalarında, bilhassa Anglofon edebiyat araştırmalarında, bir analitik kavram olarak inisiasyon temasının daha az ele alındığı görülmektedir. Bu çalışma, edebiyattaki inisiasyon temasını Toni Morrison'ın "Recitatif" isimli kısa hikayesi üzerinden ele almakta ve belirtilen eserin geleneksel inisiasyon öykülerindeki kalıp ve ortak özelliklerden ne şekilde farklılıklar arz ettiğini incelemektedir. Morrison'un inisiasyon temasını ırk ilişkileri ve ötekilik gibi kavramlarla nasıl bir araya getirdiği ve bunu yaparken de kavrama dair daha dinamik, ilişkisel ve öznelerarası bir bakış açısı getirdiği ortaya konmaktadır.

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Bu makaleyi şu şekilde kaynak gösterebilirsiniz / To cite this article (APA):
Tabur, Ş. (2022). Initiation, Race Relations and Otherness in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif". *Uluslararası Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi (UDEKAD)*, 5 (2): 176-185. DOI: https://doi.org/10.37999/udekad.1205047.

An initiation story usually centers around its young protagonist's life-changing experiences, especially those marking the transition from childhood to adulthood. Toni Morrison's "Recitatif" (1983), in this regard, can be considered an initiation story, for it telescopes its plot on a pivotal event happening to a seemingly minor, disabled character called Maggie and thereby explores a wide spectrum of processes participating actively in the major characters' transforming experiences. To investigate how this theme is foregrounded in "Recitatif," I will first delineate the definitions of initiation in literature and "initiation story" by referring to Mordecai Marcus and Elaine Ginsberg's theoretical writings, and examine the ways in which Morrison narrativizes this concept and relates her protagonists' initiatory experience to larger social relations such as race and otherness. The article will demonstrate how "Recitatif," tracing Roberta and Twyla's contested initiation into the world of experience and their subsequent disagreements over their childhood memory of what happens to the subaltern character Maggie in the orchard of St. Bonnie orphanage deviates from traditional initiation stories and calls for a more complex understanding of the concept. Morrison's dealing with the theme of initiation as a simultaneously individual and social, processual and not necessarily heroic phenomenon also urges the reader to acknowledge the significance and relevance of a whole set of social, cultural, economic processes in remembering the past and maintaining individual relations with others.

Although it is difficult to provide a cook-book definition of initiation story, there are some common characteristics which can serve as the point of departure for discussing the term. In his conceptualization of initiation as a literary theme and a frame of reference in the analysis of literary works, Mordecai Marcus begins by referring to anthropology and explains how initiation rites "center[ing] around the passage from childhood or adolescence to maturity and full membership in adult society" (1960, p. 221) have become part of social and cultural lives in many societies. Such rites of passage, imbued with rituals of various sorts, functioned as trials for the young initiate to prove him/herself to the community and thereby signified physical and spiritual maturity. To Marcus, while anthropological accounts suggest that the young's test or his/her indoctrination to get mature is done deliberately by the adult society, the majority of initiation stories do not "show adult testing or teaching the young" (1960, p. 222). Thus, the new awareness that the young reaches during his/her initiation is caused by the experience itself rather the social indoctrination s/he receives. Furthermore, Marcus refers to the two kinds initiation stories are usually grouped into: "The first group describes initiation as a passage of the young from ignorance about the external world to some vital knowledge. The second describes initiation as an important self-discovery and a resulting adjustment to life or society" (1960, p. 222). Despite variations in the sequence and status of discovery, the critical definitions of initiation story, according to Marcus, highlights the centrality of "self-understanding" (1960, p. 222), for gaining some knowledge about the world outside requires certain analytical skills which are, in turn, enhanced by the initiatory realization. Referring briefly to the definitional variations and challenges in regard of what "true initiation story," he suggests a definition, which is worth of being quoted here because of its relevance to my literary analysis in the present study:

> An initiation story may be said to show its young protagonist experiencing a significant change of knowledge about the world or himself, or a change of character, or of both, and this change must point or lead him towards an adult world. It may or may not contain

> some form of ritual, but it should give some evidence that the change is at least likely to have permanent effects. (1960, p. 222)

Thus, the element of change with the likelihood of some permanent effects is Marcus, referring to a broad spectrum of short stories, suggests grouping initiations into three types depending on "their power and effect" and names them "tentative, uncompleted, and decisive" (1960, p. 223). More precisely, while a protagonist does not cross the threshold of maturity of various sorts in some stories, s/he may go across this threshold only to find him/herself in uncertainty or embrace maturity with more firm sense of self-understanding in the end. This motif of uncertainty is pivotal in "Recitatif" as well, yet what is even more is significant is to understand how Morrison strategically employs it to explore a whole other set of relations affecting the characters' initiatory experiences. Before delineating this in greater detail however, a brief plot summary will be given below to demonstrate how "Recitatif" foregrounds one single, partly ritualistic childhood incident as catalytic event in the characters' later lives, especially in shaping their conceptions of the self and the other. As much as the incident itself however, the seemingly simple act of remembering it by leaving all biases, socio-political engagements and prejudices aside is equally significant, an issue that Morrison investigates by bringing the personal together with the public.

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), the first African American recipient of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, established herself as a major voice in American literature. Her fictional and nonfictional writing has "avert[ed] the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served" (Morrison, 1992, p. 90). Interrogating canon-formation and engaging closely with the experience of African Americans in the United States, her work is predominantly about the black American community and thus has been labeled as political in the sense that it "bear[s] witness" (Morrison, 1994, p. 183) to the lived experiences and otherwise untold stories of black people. "Recitatif" is Morrison's first and only published short story. Having appeared first in Amiri and Amina Baraka's *Confirmation: An Anthology of African American Women* (1883), it narrates Roberta and Twyla's conflictual friendship through five encounters in different places, starting when they, both eight years old, first meet in an orphanage named "St. Bonny's or St. Bonaventure" in the early 1950s and tracing until the early 1980s when the two become mothers and reside in the same gentrified town named Newburgh. From the very beginning, Twyla, as the homodiegetic narrator, makes it clear that one of them is white and the other is black: "it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race" (Morrison, 1983, p. 243), yet Morrison is too careful not to disclose which one is which at any point in the story. Despite their mothers' objection however, Roberta and Twyla build a rapport with one another in the shelter especially because they are different from the other, big girls: the two protagonists are not true orphans but only "dumped" (Morrison, 1983, p. 244) by their parents. Roberta's mother, who is described as wearing a big cross and carrying a Bible, is sick, and Twyla's "danced all night" (Morrison, 1983, p. 243), which is why Roberta and Twyla have to stay at St. Bonny. Their second encounter, possibly in the late 1960s, takes place at the Howard Johnson's, where Twyla works as a waitress and comes across Roberta, who, along with her two male friends, is on their way to see Jimi Hendrix, the famous Black, rock musician who enjoyed short-term popularity until his untimely death in 1970. To Twyla's

disappointment, Roberta is unfriendly toward her, and the earlier, after talking about their mothers briefly, leaves the restaurant without saying even good-bye. The two meet once again twelve years later after their second encounter. Twyla is now married and has begun living in a town named Newburgh with her working-class husband and stepchildren. Likewise, Roberta, with "[s]hoes, dress, everything lovely and summery and rich" (Morrison, 1983, p. 252) is now "Mrs. Benson" after marrying a well-off IBM executive. This time, Roberta is more friendly and both, unlike the previous meeting, are glad to see each other: "Now we were behaving like sisters separated for much too long" (Morrison, 1983, p. 253). Interestingly, they begin discussing about Maggie, the disabled cook, at the St. Bonny. Roberta, remembering that Maggie fell down and the big girls laughed at her, disagrees with Twyla who argues that Maggie was in fact pushed and her dresses were tore down by the girls. Roberta and Twyla encounter for the fourth time in fall when the protests over the compulsory busing of white and black students in the name of desegregation is up in the air in Newburgh. Twyla's son, Joseph, is among the students forced to visit another school in a different area, and when she takes him there, Twyla sees Roberta protesting against compulsory, desegregation busing. Once threatened by other protesters, Twyla requests Roberta to help, but she dismisses her. With the police's help, Twyla gets out of the crowd but hears Roberta calling her "the same little state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground" (Morrison, 1983, p. 257). Upon this remark, Roberta and Twyla dispute once again over what actually happened to Maggie in the orchard. To Twyla, Maggie was not even black. Roberta, however, accuses her of lying and admits that they both kicked Maggie with the other girls. As the first-person narrator, Twyla admits that she keeps thinking about Roberta's remarks especially in regard of Maggie's complexion even after this encounter: "But I was puzzled by her telling me Maggie was black. When I thought about it I actually couldn't be certain. She wasn't pitch-black, I knew, or I would have remembered that" (Morrison, 1983, p. 259). Twyla remembers that she did not kick her, yet she admits that she, associating the deaf, silent Maggie with her dancing mother, wanted to do so. Finally, Roberta and Twyla encounter for the fifth and last time at Christmas in the downtown. Referring to what she called her in their fourth encounter during the protests, Roberta tells Twyla that they did not in fact kick Maggie but adds that she actually remembered Maggie to be black: "I really did think she was black. I didn't make that up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure" (Morrison, 1983, p. 261). Like Twyla, Roberta confesses that she, too, wanted Maggie to be hurt by the big girls on that day. The two seem to settle the issue for a moment, but Roberta begins crying and utters the concluding sentence reiterating the main conflict in the narrative: "Oh shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. What the hell happened to Maggie?" (Morrison, 1983, p. 261).

As this brief plot overview may already suggest, what happens to Maggie in the orchard and the two protagonists' dynamic, competing memories of their involvement in this seemingly simple incident are of pivotal significance for not only their transformation but also Morrison's project of re-considering a number of issues, including race relations and otherness in the story. Correspondingly, "Recitatif" has been interpreted from a wide spectrum of perspectives by a solid number of critics and has established itself as a canonical text already.[10] Regarding the

[10] See, for instance, S. K. Sanders' "Maggie in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif': The Africanist Presence and Disability Studies" for the questions of African experience and disability; Benjamin S. Greene's "The Space that Race Creates" for a spatially oriented analysis; and Susana M. Morris' "Sisters separated for much too long": Women's

characters' preoccupation with the incident happening to Maggie in the orchard, the story lends itself to a reading from the initiation perspective as well, a research question which has not yet been explored comprehensively. As I argue, Morrison puts her eight-years old protagonists into a life-changing situation by involving them in Maggie's victimization in the orchard. Their ambivalent experience of either just watching how Maggie is kicked by the big girls or taking part actively in this act of violence turns out to be catalytic in their later lives.

As mentioned above, the initiatory event is considered to be a painful yet enriching experience for the young in both initiation rites and their literary representations. Likewise, Roberta and Twyla's witnessing or involvement in Maggie's victimization in the orchard clearly highlights the loss of innocence motif which is identifiable in many initiation stories. Moreover, the orchard, which is described as 2-4 acres large and filled "with little apple trees" (Morrison, 1983, p. 244) can be compared to the Biblical Garden of Eden where Eve is tempted by a serpent and thus she, along with Adam, transforms from the state of innocence and bliss to knowledge and experience. This misleadingly trivial incident in the orchard turns into a psychological drama as Roberta and Twyla begin thinking more about it especially against the background of race relations in the later years. More precisely, their remembering of what has happened to Maggie is not independent of the larger social and political issues such as the racial strife of the 1970s. Power structures both in the orphanage and in the society at large are causally linked to Roberta and Twyla's initiatory experience and their subsequent development as adults. Such wise, in "Recitatif", the female characters' initiation is not something to be celebrated as in most of traditional male initiation stories, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and Ernest Hemingway's work centering around his recurring character named Nick Adams. Concerning the different status of male and female initiatory experiences in literature, Elaine Ginsberg refers to the following five patterns:

> First, unlike some of their male counterparts, the young girls are always introduced to a heterosexual world, a world in which relationships between men and women, males and females, are the most important, if not the only, relationships which need to be understood. Second, whereas to the young men their newfound roles in the world may mean many different things, the young girls seem to see their future roles as women almost always in relation to men. Third, though the seduction-punishment pattern changes considerably in the twentieth century, the initiation process for females is still more often than not seen in terms of sexual experience either explicitly or implicitly. Fourth, there is an interesting anomaly in the fact that so many of the young girls depicted in these initiation stories are, at first, dressed in boys' clothing or bear boys' names, attributes they drop as the stories progress. They begin, it would seem, as little androgynous creatures, changing their names and their clothing only as they become more aware of their approaching womanhood. Fifth, whereas the young male initiates often have a male companion or mentor to aid or guide them [...], the young girls seem never

Friendship and Power in Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif'" for the issues of power and women's coalition building. Considering such works and the existing scholarship on the short story, "Recitatif" has not been examined from the perspective of initiation. One 1981 article entitled "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison" by Jane S. Bakerman explores her three novels on the grounds of initiation theme, but it predates the publication of "Recitatif".

> to be aided or guided by an older female who serves as a teacher. More commonly they are accompanied or even initiated by a boy or a man (1975, p. 31).

Indeed, these points raised by Ginsberg are applicable to many female initiation stories, such as Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party" and Higuchi Ichiyo "Child's Play",[11] and they offer significant insights into the different ways male and female initiation stories are traditionally organized.[12] Once "Recitatif" is considered in light of Ginsberg's discussion of female initiation story however, it corresponds to the patterns quoted above only partly. In accordance with Ginsberg's explications, the initiates in "Recitatif" do not have to accomplish heroic deeds and prove their courage as in most of male initiation stories. Furthermore, Roberta and Twyla are not necessarily initiated into the heterosexual world either voluntarily or involuntarily. Instead, the world that they are initiated into can be characterized with racial discrimination, class segregation and socio-spatial injustices. Likewise, Roberta and Twyla are not guided by a male companion or guide at any point in the narrative. They are not setting out a journey as usually the case, and Roberta and Twyla are not represented as pathetic, female victims of patriarchal social order. Gender is surely at stake in "Recitatif", yet it is not as profound as in most of the female initiation stories, such as "The Garden Party". More importantly, "Recitatif" does not render initiation as a one-time event that happens to the young in either successful or regrettable way. Clearly, something important occurs both to Maggie and the young protagonists in the orchard, but the audacity of remembering what really happens along with their ambiguous role in her victimization is introduced as a catalytic event that re-visits their adult life repeatedly. To put it differently, Roberta and Twyla go through the same initiatory experience every single time they meet and remember what has actually happened in the orchard, which proves to be a challenge for both due to the nation-wide discourse fueling othering and racial stereotyping among different social groups. Morrison's representation of the initiatory experience as a non-linear, open-ended one is significant here because it, I argue, conjure up her conceptions of race and otherness. Morrison, in many of her novels such as *The*

[11] Laura, in Mansfield's "The Garden Party," for instance, is supposed to be initiated from a childish girl into the manners of womanhood thanks to the party that her mother, Mrs. Sheridan, hosts in their high-class mansion on a perfect, "ideal" day. However, she gets informed about the death of Mr. Scott, a working-class neighbor, and insists that the party should be cancelled, a suggestion which does not find acceptance among her mother and her sister. To distract and seduce her into the aristocratic manners of womanhood, Mrs. Sheridan gives her hat to Laura who actually changes her mind and focuses on the garden party. At the end of the party, Mr. Sheridan mentions the Mr. Scott's death once again to his wife's dislike, and Mrs. Sheridan suggests sending the leftovers to the dead man's house. Wearing her hat as a symbol of her new status, Laura takes the leftovers to the Scotts herself. On her way to the funeral house, Laura feels intimated and almost decides to go back to their Edenic family house up on the hill but knocks on the door in the end. The widow's sister insists that Laura should come in, and she walks through the room where the dead body is lying. There, Laura confronts both the dead man and death itself, feels ashamed of her hat as a result of her greater understanding of issues such as death and class differences. She leaves the funeral house, and comes across Laurie, her brother, on her way back to home. The story ends with Laura's sobbing and telling her brother: "'Isn't life, she stammered, 'isn't life'" (Mansfield, 1995, p.491). Thanks to its quest plot conjuring up Demeter and Persephone, the female protagonist's planned initiation to a heterosexual world, the hat symbolizing Laura's new ascribed self and Laurie appearance as a mentor figure in the end, "The Garden Party" conjures up the characteristics Ginsberg lists regarding female initiation story.

[12] For an insightful critique of Ginsberg's discussion of female initiation story however, see Ina Bergman's "Stories of Female Initiation: Two 19th Century Examples of Female Professional Success". Bergman argues that Ginsberg is indeed "biased and only looks for texts that emphasize one of the key issues of feminist criticism, oppression and (sexual) victimization of the female" (2001, para. 4). Bergman's article examines two literary texts that "are successful initiation stories centered around young girls who are not passive victims of patriarchy but take action which leads them to a life of independence and self-realization, contrary to the accepted role models of their times" (Bergman, 2001, para. 4).

Bluest Eye and *A Mercy*, contests the notion that the United States is now a post-racial nation and cautions the reader against the human infallibility under certain conditions. To her, human beings can incline towards vicious practices such as racial discrimination, othering and bias in remembering the past, and the protagonists' initiatory experience in the orchard at St. Bonnie reflects this project of Morrison. More precisely, "Recitatif" relates a subaltern character's victimization not only to the protagonists' but also to the whole society's maturity and the issues, such as class differences, gentrification, racial tensions and othering that surface every time Roberta and Twyla meets over years underlines the fact that such an initiation is always open-ended and under construction.

Accordingly, Roberta and Twyla's experience in the orchard is far too complex and defies easy characterization as being a traditional or female initiation story in the way Elaine Ginsberg formulates, and Morrison's situating the subaltern character Maggie as being central to their transformation makes "Recitatif" particularly significant in thinking more openly and critically about the concept of initiation. Maggie is an intriguingly inactive yet pivotal character who requires a more thorough examination here. Working at the orphanage's kitchen, Maggie is mute, old, "sandy-colored" (Morrison, 1983, p. 244) and bowlegged, and thus she lies at the bottom in terms of power hierarchy at St. Bonnie. Roberta and Twyla's attitude toward her is ambivalent. On the one hand, they sympathize with her especially on the face of the so-called "gar girls" who pose threat both to Maggie and themselves. To put it differently, these big, stronger girls are situated on a higher position in terms of power than Roberta, Twyla and Maggie, which is one reason why the two protagonists sympathize with her. On the other hand, they, as the later encounters between Roberta and Twyla reveal, develop a sense of anger at Maggie as well. They, coalescing with one another and being able to speak and shout back, are definitely more powerful than the speechless, wretched Maggie, a fact which interestingly gets them closer to the gar girls as revealed in Roberta and Twyla's later encounters. They even identify Maggie with whichever weakness they find with themselves. As Twyla confesses, Maggie reminds them of their mothers:

> 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. (Morrison, 1983, pp. 259-60)

This ambivalent attitude towards Maggie and her victimization in the orchard suggest that she occupies a physically insignificant yet symbolically powerful presence in the story. Correspondingly, Sarah Madsen Hardy interprets Maggie "as a metaphor—a figure that represents not only the conflicts within and between the two main characters, but the broader social dynamics that these conflicts reflect" (Morrison, 1983, p. 250). To Hardy, "[o]ne thorny issue that Maggie raises is how confusing the distinction between victims and victimizers can become" (Morrison, 1983, p. 250), a trial that Twyla and Roberta undergo not only when they witness Maggie's humiliation for the first time in the orchard, but also each time they attempt

to remember what really happens there. "Recitatif" clearly demonstrates how one's memories of a seemingly trivial incident happened to someone else in the past can be distorted and censured even by the self depending on the social and political facts that s/he sides with. Despite their different complexion and their parents' warnings, Twyla and Roberta can actually form a friendship at St. Bonny's, but the social and political discourse force them to view each other differently. Their strong identification with each other is disrupted and the friend at St. Bonny's becomes the other for the self to the extent that one cannot remember the past unbiased without distorting it. It can thus be argued that Morrison's story of initiation examines the simultaneous processes of othering while finding the self.

In line with the political status of Morrison's art, "Recitatif" is itself an initiation for the reader as well. It is a challenging, enigmatic and disturbing narrative, and it invites the reader to think about the processes which cause Roberta and Twyla to turn against each other and questions what it means to show a decent attitude toward an act of violence. As in most of Morrison's writing, the reader is required to occupy a dynamic position and take part actively in the reading process. While doing so, the reader is asked to question his/her own pre-conceptions. More precisely, the short story consists of Roberta and Twyla's five encounters over years, and there are narrative gaps between these encounters. This narrative structure opens more space for the reader to fill in the gaps using his or her own imagination. Besides, Morrison is too careful to disclose which character is white and which one is black. Instead, there are a good number of stereotypical clues which might imply the characters' racial identities, yet each of these clues might be interpreted otherwise as well. For instance, Roberta's "big and wild" (Morrison, 1983, p. 249) hair as well as her visit of Jimi Hendrix might suggest that she is the black one. Yet, a closer examination would demonstrate that white American teenagers also preferred Afro hairstyle and Jimi Hendrix's popularity was by no means limited to the African Americans during the late 1960s. With such ambiguous clues, the reader is provoked to assume the characters' racial identities only to fail in reaching a firm conclusion ultimately. Thus, "Recitatif" urges the reader to realize that such stereotypical characteristics related to one's racial identity are not stable, and they matter as long as people ascribe any significance to them. Instead, it highlights that the socio-economic processes and political discourses separate Roberta and Twyla despite their initial friendship and confuse their mind once they attempt to remember the initiatory experience happened in the orchard of the St. Bonny's. The reader, too, is encouraged to challenge his/her own assumptions by contemplating what may have happened to Maggie, which is a form of initiation for him/her as well.

In conclusion, "Recitatif" explores the initiation experiences of its female protagonists, and thus it lends itself to a reading from the perspective of initiation story. However, "Recitatif" deviates from the conventions to be found in traditional male and female initiation stories and narrates the maturation of Roberta and Twyla in different ways. Morrison's protagonists are to prove neither their physical strength nor their readiness be initiated into the heterosexual world. Instead, Roberta and Twyla's initiation begins with the silenced, minor character Maggie's victimization in the orchard of St. Bonnie orphanage, and the narrative explores the reasons these two characters cannot learn from this initiatory experience even when they become adults with their own families. "Recitatif" points toward the social, political and economic discourses along with a set of other complex processes which situate Roberta and Twyla as being "other" to one another, and this proves to be of utmost significance even when the two characters

attempt remembering the pivotal event that happened to Maggie years ago. More precisely, the fact that Roberta and Twyla look "like salt and pepper" (Morrison, 1983, p. 244) cannot withhold them from establishing a friendship in the orphanage, yet their difference matters only with the racial discourse and the social strife between white and black communities. Therefore, it can be argued that the initiatory experience in "Recitatif" is not necessarily individual, instantaneous and heroic but it is simultaneously communal and personal, processual and tragic. Such discourses and group alignment can indeed shackle one's memory of a past event and blur distinctions to be made between the victim and perpetrator, and the black and the white. The challenge for Roberta and Twyla is to leave such discursive, unstable categories aside and reach maturity and objectivity. The reader gets confronted with a similar challenge as well: the textual clues concerning the protagonists' racial identity are unstable, and they matter as long as one ascribes any meaning to them with the futile task of concluding which one is white and which one is black. The question "what the hell has happened to Maggie" in the story's open ending initiates the reader to question her/himself and think more critically about remembering the past and understanding the intersecting processes rendering the self and other, the right and wrong in particular ways.

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Conflict statement: The author of the article declares that he does not have ant person or financial relationship that may be a party to this study, therefore there is no conflict of interest.