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Rhetorical Analysis of Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech

Writer Toni Morrison, in her 1993 Nobel Lecture, conveys to us the importance of language, and challenges us to unite people instead of further divide them. Morrison was awarded the prize at a time when the Canon of Western Literature was being diversified. Having won the prize, she takes the opportunity to remonstrate to those with power, many of whom are in the room with her, that they should let this happen. However, the people in the room are only one audience she has in mind; she also makes the speech for the global audience, as well as the American audience, as well as the Black American audience. The tone changes throughout the speech, depending on which emotion she wants to convey. She is successful in convincing and reaching out to her main audiences, but likely also confuses almost every single person with specific references most people wouldn't realize.

Morrison's speech can be broken into three main parts, the first of which is a story about an old woman. She starts out with this narrative, with a very soft tone of voice. This takes us back to the days when we first learned how to speak or read.

> "I believe that one of the principal ways in which we acquire, hold, and digest information, is via narrative. So I hope you will understand, when the remarks I make begin with what I believe to be the first sentence of our childhood that we all remember. The phrase, 'Once upon a time'" (Morrison).

She brings us back to when we were a child, and our views on life were still being molded. This has a few purposes. First, she wants to reach out to her entire audience. It is a safe assumption that her entire audience was read or told stories when they were younger - it is part of all human culture, it is how children are simultaneously taught language and morals. Anyone this isn't true for will not understand this speech. Another purpose is to point out that stories mold our minds. Stories teach us morals when we are very young, and being a writer that deals with racism, this is important to point out because narratives are one of the ways to pass racism down. This is a point likely to be picked up by any audience dealing with cultural prejudices. Another important point this pulls together is the universality of humanity - she points out that this story is in all cultures, reminding us that there is one race - the human race. This is a point likely to be understood by her global audience. This also simultaneously brings up the Canon of Western Literature - the Canon is what future generations will read. They will learn from these books, and

it is important to introduce them to more than just the ideas of dead white men. This will likely be heard by her scholarly, or direct, audience furthering her point of changing the Western Canon.

Something very important Morrison brings up is that the wise elder is blind. Morrison first mentions that the woman is blind in the first sentence. Then again in the second paragraph. Then in the third paragraph, "…a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness" (Morrison), she scoffs at the children for thinking the woman's blindness is a disability - implying that it is a benefit. Two paragraphs later, she mentions that, "She is blind and cannot see her visitors...She does not know their color, gender or homeland" (Morrison). She does not put all of these facts directly together, but they are there, waiting for the audience to notice them - but only if they want to. She is stating it is a benefit to not be able to determine of what color, gender, or homeland her visitors are - to not take one look at a person, and assume who they are. After all, she is renowned for being wise, maybe that's why? Of course, since this is so subtle, it will only be picked up by an audience that is concerned with the prejudices of the world. To her global audience, she points out that not only are their prejudiced people in our cultures, but the culture itself is prejudiced by the language it uses. This also suggests to her scholarly audience that they shouldn't be prejudiced against writers that aren't dead white men. It should also be noted that two of the possible identities she identifies the women as possibly are a griot (African culture), and a daughter of slaves. This is something likely to be noted by those focused on her African-American heritage.

The first part has a significant difference between the reading and listening audiences. The written speech starts with "Once upon a time," while the spoken speech starts with a preamble before launching into "Once upon a time" in a soft, storytelling voice. For the reading audience, the opening phrase of "Once upon a time" is relied upon to transport the audience into a childhood fairy tale. For the listening audience, Ms. Morrison first explained the lack of an opening thesis, then launched into "Once upon a time" in a soft, bed-time story speaking voice that was not evident to the reading audience. If she had started the speech with, "There was once an old woman," and still used the same, soft tone, the listening audience would have gotten the idea, but it would have been less obvious for the readers. It would make sense for the reading audience to start reading and see "Once upon a time" as the first phrase, but it is somewhat confusing for a listening audience, expecting some sort of thesis.

Then Toni Morrison shifts to the interpretation of the old woman's thoughts. Her voice gets tense when she says, "The old woman's silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter" (Morrison). This prepares us for the shift from the bedtime story to the sermon. Of course, she doesn't give us quite enough time to prepare for the next section. She breaks down our walls in the first section by bringing us back to our childhood so we can be more open minded when she starts spewing her strong ideals. She explains what the old woman means by, "It is in your hands" (Morrison); how the

children are exercising their power on the life of the bird. She goes on to explain that she thinks of the bird as language, and she is worried how the future generations will use it. She expands on this, with sermonic tone, to explain how language has been abused. This sermonic tone reminds some of Martin Luther King Junior, but it also makes us one with her, and rallies us to her cause, making us upset about the misuse of language. For the readers, this tone is kept very well. "It is the language that drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascists boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottomed-out mind" (Morrison). Just reading this sentence, I can hear her voice coming through, her rhythm. She keeps her rhythm consistent for the readers through parallelism in some places, unusual grammatical constructions in others, and still some different schemes, and keeps mostly the same words emphasized through striking diction and metaphors. These words of "drinking blood" and "tucking fascist boots under crinolines" are so striking that you can hear her emphasis of them just by reading them. This specific quote is to make the whole world weary of euphemisms that help us ignore what is truly happening.

Close to the end of the sermon, she brings up a biblical reference, again reminding us of Martin Luther King Junior. She brings up the Tower of Babel, and how it failed because they failed to all use the same language, but then she takes her own spin on it, "Perhaps the achievement of Paradise was premature, a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives period" (Morrison). Oh, what do you know? You can hear her again through the parallelism! Anyways, this not only is a reminder of her African American heritage by reminding us of the preacher Martin Luther King Junior, but also brings up the idea that there are other viewpoints that are viable. It is easy to assume if we are told from someone of power that our viewpoint is the only correct one - and that could be the monks that "copied" the bible, or the politicians tucking their fascist language under patriotism - but it is the wiser man (or woman :) that realizes that every viewpoint is viable. This is something Morrison hopes everyone will pick up and walk away with, to better unite the human race, but also addresses her scholarly audience, telling them they shouldn't let the Canon of literature be just dead white men.

After holding us under the lake language is drowning in, she pulls us out with the hands of Honest Abe.

> "When a President of the United States thought about the graveyard his country had become, and said, 'The world will little note nor long remember what we say here. But it will never forget what they did here,' his simple words are exhilarating in their life-sustaining properties because they refused to encapsulate the reality of 600,000 dead men in a cataclysmic race war" (Morrison).

One specific thing Morrison points out is that patriotism can be used for nefarious purposes. Here she reminds us that patriotism isn't inherently evil - it can be used for good purposes. She challenges us to be vigilant consumers of language, and not just accept what is spoonfed to us. However, she doesn't want us to just bat everything away - some language is beautiful, and carefully crafted to unite instead of divide. This is a point for the global audience, which is why she does not mention Abraham Lincoln or the Gettysburg address by name. Instead, by mentioning the United States, cataclysmic race war, and direct quotes from the speech, she gives the audience that does not know of these things enough knowledge to convey her meaning, and simultaneously brings all Americans to a special place in their hearts with our top-hatted, bearded, childhood hero, and makes them feel better about being patriotic.

After that, Morrison gives us other ideas of how language can be used for greatness, but does not forget to remind us once again that molested language is part of every culture. "But who does not know of literature banned because it is interrogative; discredited because it is critical; erased because alternate?" (Morrison). Again, notice how the emphasis and rhythm seeps through the parallelism. With this sentence, Morrison points out a specific example of language not being used for greatness, and warns her global audience, but also directly addresses the problem of the Western Canon - we need alternate voices in it.

After she makes us happy with an examples of unmolested language, Morrison shifts to the third section of her speech, preparing us to be more open minded for something which is not as grave. The shift doesn't really happen until she makes us inquisitive. "Who are they, these children? What did they make of that encounter?" (Morrison). Morrison once again brings us back to our early childhood, but this time uses the "why phase" to drop us into childrens' shoes. It also brings a lighter tone to the readers - no longer is there an old preacher passing on his wisdom, but now there is a curious child asking questions. "Suppose the visit was only a ruse, a trick to get to be spoken to, taken seriously as they have not been before" (Morrison). We all jumped to the old woman's defense when the children were playing a trick on the woman. We were willing to assume that because children were bugging an old woman, they were naughty children. She pulls out the rug from underneath us. This is a message to her global audience to be wary of what people tell you, and to be equally wary of assumptions. This can also be interpreted as the advantage a child has over being old and wise - there are no assumptions ingrained by culture. She also is sending the message that there can be multiple different perspectives, multiple different interpretations. This is important for the global audience, but also the scholarly audience - there can be many different perspectives, so we should let there be more than just dead white men in the Canon.

The children go on to ask questions of the old women, and sometimes in anger, as can be seen (and heard) in, "Do you think we are stupid enough to perjure ourselves again and again with the fiction

of nationhood?" (Morrison). This specific quote mentions nationhood, which can be interpreted in very different ways. Nationhood can be viewed as a uniting force, or a divisive force. Making a nation can be bringing large groups of people together for freedom, or masking minority opinions. Making a nation can also be dividing up groups of people through conflict, or making minorities have a larger say in their government. In any case, the children are upset with the government, and do not feel they can fix it. The children are very upset with the women for not giving them her wisdom, and instead trivializing them. Eventually, they tell their own story.

The children start telling a story about a wagonload of slaves, freezing in the cold, that stop at an inn. "Tell us about ships turned away from shorelines at Easter, placenta in a field" (Morrison). This line is likely a reference to Jews fleeing Hitler and being turned back. This reference is so specific that most of the audience will not understand, but it will bring special meaning to those who do. The placenta in a field represents slaves being treated as livestock, having to give birth in a field. Then the children go on to describe slaves freezing, but hopeful. The American audiences are likely to assume these are African-American slaves, but other cultures don't have to. Is the winter literal or figurative? Probably both; slaves were probably loaded into wagons and expected to keep each other warm in the winter, however the winter could also represent the suffering or death the slaves had to face. The boy comes out and give the slaves cider, but apparently he will soon have a gun. The girl looks carefully at all the slaves - they make eye contact. This can show us the innocence of children. Even if their culture will make them evil slave catchers in three years, before they are tainted, they see the truth that all humans are created equal. The hunch of the shoulders showed how they were upset because they were close to death from being treated like livestock. The warm food saved the slaves from immediate death, but also gave them a chance to see children untainted by their culture, that actually sees them as humans. However, this is just my interpretation. Morrison intentionally leaves the description vague - she doesn't say the people on the ships are Jews, she doesn't say they are African or American slaves, she doesn't tell us whether the children are black, white, or something else. This is be so it can be interpreted differently from her many different audiences, which also makes the statement that language shouldn't be put in a box. "Word work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative…" (Morrison). We have been shown that there can be different viewpoints and perspectives, is it not fitting that we are given an example? The best generative things don't just make one thing, but multiple things. A different audience can hear the same speech and see something different. After all, living in America, this passage makes me think of slavery and the south, but isn't it true that the woman didn't have to be from America? Isn't it true that someone could have heard this speech that had never heard of America? That is part of Morrison's point. Language should not be put in a box, everyone should be able to seek their own meaning from it. For the readers,

the tone may not be kept as well as the previous sections, but it does not matter because it is largely an image section, and the same words read or spoken bring the same images to mind.

Finally, Morrison ends by bringing us back to the old woman. "'Finally,' she says, 'I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together'" (Morrison). We know that the woman thought of the bird as language, so we know the children have captured the beauty of language, and the woman trusts them as the future generation. However, Morrison now forces us, as the children, to stare in the eyes of the old woman. "What did they hear in those final words: 'The bird is in your hands'? A sentence that gestures towards possibility or one that drops a latch?" (Morrison). The old woman never assumed mal purpose of the children after all. She gave them a few words of wisdom and let them do with it what they wanted to do. She didn't give them an answer, she gave them something to draw their own conclusions from. That is the thought she left with her whole audience. Morrison challenges us to appreciate language that does not have one conclusion, and perhaps make our own writing with such language. To her global audience, she is trusting us to use language wisely - because she can't force us to - and to the scholarly men, she is trusting them to make the right decision about the language Canon she holds dear.