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Exploring the Artistic Ossature of Nature and Function of Horror in Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

The historically painful scars left by slavery in the psyche of the surviving African American community, the horrible devastations caused by the two World Wars and the financial collapse of the Great Depression of 1929 that ruined the American economic capacities prompted a sceptical feeling for the future of the American society. Besides, the racist ideology that persisted in America despite the complete abolition of slavery creating thereby a class-based society, and the phallogocentric spirit which disregarded woman brought in a pessimistic sentiment in the lives of blacks. This distressful state of affairs was exacerbated by the rise of a rampant capitalistic imperialism which alienated the human condition of the ordinary American individual. A large part of Toni Morrison's fiction draws from these painful experiences that stunted the American society especially the African American community. An artistic reading of her writing indicates a significant presence of elements of the terrifying, of revulsion and disgust that pervade her narratives and which render Morrison's novels a horror fiction. This paper explores the nature and function of the artistic structure of horror that Morrison deploys in her writing to decry human depersonalization and advocate an establishment of an inclusive American society.

Keywords: horror; fear; terror; universal horror; consequential horror



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A. Introduction

Toni Morrison has stipulated in the preface to *Beloved* (2004) that in writing her novels she “wanted the reader to be kidnapped, thrown ruthlessly into an alien environment as the first step into a shared experience with the book’s population—just as the characters were snatched from one place to another, from any place to any other, without preparation or defence” (xviii). This paper on the nature and function of horror in Morrison’s novels opens with the writer’s statement about the oddness and atypicality her readers feel and which constitute the foundation of horror. The paper examines five novels that reveal features and aspects of horror in fictional writing. These novels are *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Love*. While most literary studies on Morrison focus on the thematic assessment of her writing, this study is solely artistic. It analyses the hinges upon which Morrison’s horror rests, why and how these novels are designed to create ‘horror’. The paper thereby examines how horror, used as a tool, approaches the social issues American society faces/-ed both in past and in present. But before we delve into the gist of the discussion, it is essential to highlight and explicate the meaning and contours of horror within an artistic or literary context.

B. What is horror in art and literature?

Julia Kristeva (1982) and Judith Butler (2006) give important considerations on the foundations of horror. For these critics, horror is associated with an individual’s abject state that makes him feel afflicted and “cast off” (Kristeva 27). This is a difficult task as horror itself is triggered off by various situations that may be experienced differently. The critic summarizes the abject and horror as that “which inherently disturbs conventional identity” (32).

Mathias F. Clasen (2007) holds that “horror is defined affectively and not according to setting or content” (25). According to Clasen, there is horror when a work of art raises a certain amount of



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psychological tension, trepidation or dread which in fact differ from one individual to another and from one incident to another. While setting is an important dynamic in horror and Gothic fiction (Botting 122; Punter 67), Clasen believes that setting plays less importance to make a novel or film horrible. But he joins Kristeva at some degree when he asserts that horror “is that kind of fiction which is designed to scare and disturb its audience.” (98)

Whatever consideration it may be, horror relates principally to what is hard to endure and which makes an individual’s life difficult to take in hand, if not impossible (Kristeva 28). In fact, the domain of horror cuts the notion of the normal to move into the world of the abnormal, the strange, the weird, the fantastic and at some extent the supernatural. With regard to the novels under analysis, instances of communication between the living and the dead (ghosts), scene of human blood drinking, images of graves and cemeteries, the numerous cases of madness, incestuous crimes, mysterious fires, cases of suicides and immolations, awful sexual assaults...pervade the novels under discussion. These instances are elements of the supernatural world and the strange. They turn the novels’ narratives into a horror literature in which the normal leaves space to the abnormal and the unnatural to result in suspense, fear and terror which are the basic elements of horror.

C. The appalling and the disgust: the universal horror and consequential horror in

Morrison’s fiction

a) The universal horror

Morrison engages various ways to negotiate an appropriate socio-cultural recognition of the African American community. A structurally artistic reading of *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Love* indicates that most horrifying incidents enacted in these novels belong to the universal realities that man and his environment experience in their day-to-day life. This



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universality in Morrison's imagination of horror occurrences is what this paper terms "Universal horror". But what does actually the concept "Universal horror" mean and refer to in Morrison's fictional writing?

Upon the way Morrison imagines and conceives horrifying incidents in her novels, the universal horror is a sort of horror that pervades her writing. In this fiction, the horrifying events, situations or images have real existence in the rational world. These incidents are a fictionalised state of the everyday hardships that individuals know and experience throughout their lives. In this category of universal horror, there are no fantastic incidents or unworkably exaggerated situations which do not have a realistic (material) reference in the natural world. In this horror, incidents that alternate throughout the novels' narratives emanate from cultural norms and tradition, individuals' social interactions, social customs, and the mythological heritage.

Initially, Morrison employs horror in her writing to discuss the issues of racial marginalization and womanhood. The universal horror paints efficiently the deplorable human condition of the African American in general and the African American woman in particular who has to endure a double oppression of being black and being woman. In all these novels, the universal horror presents the uncanny fictionalised incidents in a style that transforms the narratives into a unique literary tradition. The developed themes and motifs are modelled almost in a language and style that do not change much despite the thematic diversity.

In utilizing extensively the universal horror in these works, Morrison opens new windows that facilitate readers to access the unknown realities of the African American plight that had been interred by time and social neglect. The historical slave narrative *Beloved* is a typical example par excellence which unearths the tragedies of slavery under the usage of universal horror. In this



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novel, next to the supernatural identity of *Beloved* which dominates the plot's incidents, the narrative presents other instances that pertain to a horror which is 'universalized'. The images of *Beloved's* grave and the cemetery where she was buried, Sethe's mother and Nan's gang rape at various times first on the sea and later on the plantations, the live burning of slaves as Sixo's case reveals, the unjust hanging of Sethe's mother, Sethe's sexual assaults by schoolteacher's nephews, etc, are some of the horror incidents that the novel discusses and which have direct connection in the rational world. These inhuman crimes are commonplace in our day-to-day life. They portray the ordinary wickedness of human nature. Universal horror is also a milestone in *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and *Love*. *Song of Solomon's* plot describing Smith committing suicide, the terrifying images of the skeleton of Macon Dead I kept in Pilate's house, the mythological flight of Solomon, Hagar and Ryna's madness, Macon Dead's ghost meeting and conversing with his offspring Pilate and Macon Jr., Ruth's potion of love to her husband Macon Junior...all these instances are also universal horror incidents that have literal references in the real world. Even though the manifestations of ghosts cannot be understood as a natural phenomenon, they irrupt into the rational world where they interact with humans.

Morrison's oeuvre focuses primarily on the living conditions of the African American community. She feels great concern about the degrading social status that the American society seeks to impose permanently over the subaltern. Morrison seeks to subvert this depraved and corrupt hegemony. She is heart-stricken to see humans abuse other humans in a time when humanity has attained a significant stage in terms of human rights advancement. We have already mentioned that Morrison's focal point centers around the struggle for socio-cultural recognition of the African American community amid the predominant white culture. This struggle is grounded in the 'black' history, its present-day challenges, its role to find a place in the cosmopolitan America and most significantly the acquisition of an America devoid of racial discrimination and gendered-class consciousness. And with regard to this gender-class awareness, Morrison develops a greater



The Achievers Journal

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concern for the debasement of the black woman in whom she locates her self. Ágnes Surányi (2007) posits that Morrison's women in *The Bluest Eye* have become schizophrenic due to a traumatic treatment to which they are subjected. Surányi bemoans Pauline Breedlove's character, a black mother who "hates her own children as a reminder of her hopeless state and adores the young child of the white family she slaves for" (13). In addition, the case of Ruth Foster despised by her husband in *Song of Solomon*, Eva's austere married life with Boyboy and Nell's betrayal by her husband Jude Greene in *Sula* are other acute examples of the African American women's predicament that Morrison strongly decries.

The universal horror serves Morrison as an artistic tool that assists her to penetrate into the kernel of the social matters using a highly fictionalized method to persuade the audience the need for social change. The variability of the issues she discusses cannot be adequately achieved outside the usage of the style. The raw materials she gathers are treated in a way that the narratives disclose distinctively what the society suffers and the therapy it needs to cure the ills it has been facing for ages. The items (fictional incidents) she creates are seen as natural happenings having a certain familiarity with the reader. This naturalness that horror incidents incarnate is explained by the fact that the writer borrows nothing from the world outside the audience. Due to Morrison's ingenuity in the design of horror, this naturalness of horror incidents strikes even the supernatural incidents used in her narratives: the natural and the unnatural, the real and the unreal meet in the rational world making thus the living and the dead come in communion. The cases of the return of Beloved's ghost to 124 to challenge her mother Sethe and the meeting of Macon Dead's ghost with her children Macon Jr. and Pilate in *Song of Solomon* illustrate. The living and the dead meet. The supernatural which, in fact, transcends nature by breaking the boundaries of the physical and the abstract is, in this context, identified as a natural occurrence; this is because the human collective conscience recognizes the existence of these extraterrestrial phenomena though they escape and defy the law of nature and human rationality. Drawn from natural occurrences, the



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universal horror renders the writer's narratives easily comprehensible and direct to absorb. For instance, the reader can easily understand the murder Sethe committed against her children as a result of the cruelty of the institution of slavery.

With the deployment of universal horror in her fiction, Morrison provides a possibility to approach issues regarding an individual in their private existence and the issues pertaining to a society in whole. The universal horrors narrated in *Beloved*, for instance, paint normally collective issues (sufferings) of the black community at the epoch of slavery while most universally horrifying events discussed in *Love*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon* treat individuals' issues related to their personal lives. Morrison is aware that beside communal issues that people face in society, there are personal challenges that affect an individual in his private existence. The animalistic hatred which destroys the 'Cosey women' in *Love* is an issue that affects solely the life of the presupposed heirs of the departed Bill Cosey. This imbroglio does not portray a collective challenge of the black neighborhood where Cosey's Hotel and Resort is located. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's obsession of 'blue eyes' to secure the desired beauty and her awful double rape by her father do not reflect a great concern for the African American people though, in fact, some adolescent black girls yearn for the white beauty as a consequence of cultural mimicry. Milkman Dead's mysteriously petering leg in *Song of Solomon* and Eva's deliberate loss of her leg by train in *Sula* are incidents that translate the characters' troubled lives in their private existence. There is no direct connection with the social concerns of the societies to which they belong. Sula's self-cutting of her finger's tip as a way to terrify the boys who want to harass her, for instance, is an effect of personal valiance. All these instances of universal horror denote personal challenges that people experience in private life. In bringing individual matters in the construction of the universal horror, Morrison wants to instruct humanity that there are numerous individual problems that are usually ignored or minimized by society; yet which can affect the same society in the long run if these challenges do not meet an adequate way out.



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b) The consequential horror

Beside the universal horror which abounds the novels, Morrison brings in another dimension of horror: the *consequential horror*. This section explores the second aspect of horror—labelled in this paper as ‘consequential horror’—that the writer deploys in the depiction of African American dilemma.

Consequential horror is another sort of horror that Morrison applies in her narratives. Unlike universal horror, incidents or events deployed in this horror do not have natural identification in the real world. It is very restricted in its operational field. Whereas the universal horror bases its foundation on what actually exists in the rational world and which is familiar to the audience and the environment around, consequential horror appears different in its artistic action. It originates from Morrison’s free imagination of events which do not relate to the rational world. However, even though it resists the laws of nature, it does neither have connection with the fantastic world nor with the supernatural one. The magical nature of supernatural literature indicates a certain link with the rational world; we saw above this link with *Beloved*’s and Macon Dead’s ghosts which make irruption into the lives and environment of living human beings. This is not possible for consequential horror. Its usage does not require the natural identification of a referent in the real world. Furthermore this horror has been designated ‘consequential’ because, in most cases, its incidents arise from other pre-existing horror incidents, situations or events.

There are significant examples of consequential horror that Morrison deploys in her writing. While reading *Song of Solomon*, the narrative presents Milkman with a leg that gradually grows shorter without clear causes (82). Milkman is sane; he has no specific disease responsible for the mysterious state. He only sees his leg gradually decreasing physically. However, Milkman has



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neither pain nor disease responsible for this corporeal change. The traumatic state in Milkman's health has no logical explanation or connection in the natural world. The mysterious dwindling leg is perceived as a consequent retribution against his greed, contempt and arrogant nature that he inherited from his father. In addition, the reader learns from *Song of Solomon* that Pilate was born without a navel (Morrison 112). This means that she was not biologically linked to her mother's womb during conception. Such a conception is not possible in the real world; it escapes the logic of the law of nature. However, nowhere does the narrative state that Pilate descends from extraterrestrial parents such as a god and a goddess as was the case of Helen in the Greek mythology for example. Pilate's father was Macon Dead I while her mother was Sing—all being humans. Her conception was neither natural nor supernatural. It straddled the two binary worlds.

Beloved's return from grave as a ghost after eighteen years attributes her a supernatural identity to fit into the category of universal horror. Paradoxically, that she joins her family and stays there for a long period, plays with her siblings, interacts with her mother Sethe in various ways, eats, drinks as humans do, sleeps with them under same roof, and beyond all invites Paul D and have sex together is beyond supernatural explanation. Her ghostly identity undergoes a transitional mutation that attributes Beloved an intermediate identity located in a liminal space i.e. a space between humans and ghosts in this context. Beloved's mutation from ghost to a nearing human state is a result of the long stay in 124 after her return from grave. This identity which overlaps the real and the unreal breaks the boundaries of the universal horror to become an incident of consequential horror. Gregory Wiseman (2012) contends that "this ambivalent state of Morrison's horror is an assertion of the duality of life" (47).

Basically, Morrison creates incidents of consequential horror in her fiction to bring digression that stimulates audience's interest in the story reading. Being applied as digression, instances of consequential horror rarely come at the beginning of a plot or at the end. They generally appear in



The Achievers Journal

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midway story: Morrison applies it as a device that revives the reader's interest after a long unnerving reading of uncanny instances. Serving as digressive devices, the instances of consequential horror generally play a superficial role in the narratives as Ogo A. Ofuani (1988) avows:

What marks a digression is precisely the fact that "it is not directly related, syntactically, semantically, and even pragmatically, to the main conversational distribution of its adjacent utterances." In short, a digression does not fit into the "mainstream of conversation." It breaks the pattern which consists in each utterance adequately "responding" to the preceding one, a pattern which seems to characterize any non-digressive stretch of conversation. (312)

Ofuani's observation about how digression works in a story meets the consequential horror that Morrison deploys in her novels. Horror incidents of this category have little role in the 'mainstream' of the story. Milkman's dwindling leg and Pilate's lack of navel have little influence either in form or content of *Song of Solomon's* finality. However, at some stages, these incidents 'break' the narrative's normal development—introducing some sort of relief but without altering the plot's content. With its digressive feature, consequential horror enhances emotional feelings. Milkman's mysterious leg creates pity in the reader's mind when he remembers that Milkman's disability makes him lose social esteem among friends.

D. Conclusion

Ultimately, Morrison uses horror in her fiction to approach appropriately the issues of marginalization which generate the agony of non-belonging and uprootedness. Through the double



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identity of universal and consequential horror that make the frame of the narratives, the writer succeeds to reveal the pain of socio-cultural exclusion and the subsequent destruction of the American society in whole. The uncanny images and abject incidents she creates paint vividly the social malaise that haunts generally the African American and provides the reader and the American society in whole a message to establish an effective society.

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The Achievers Journal

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