

Notes on Recitatif by Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison's 1983 short story "Recitatif" tells the story of Twyla and Roberta, two women who become acquaintances in a shelter during their youth, and share a rocky friendship from that point forward. The acquaintance is tested by its historical context, which puts the girls' friendship within the context of the "black-white" issue, as Roberta calls it. This issue of race forms the story's various moments of tension, and is in the background of the entire story. Interestingly, the race of the women is never made explicit, something that Morrison did intentionally. By removing racial clues, it is left to the reader to place values of right and wrong upon the two women without the often crippling aid of racial markers.

Twyla and Roberta meet each other in St. Bonny's, formerly known as St. Bonaventure, when they are both eight years old. While in the shelter, Twyla does not want to share a room with people like Roberta because her mother once told her that they smell funny. She tries to get different lodging by admitting that her mother would not approve. In time, however, Twyla finds Roberta different than the depiction her mother paints, and the two stick together, especially as they are afraid of the older girls at the shelter. Most of the children are orphans, but Twyla is at the shelter because her mother is a dancer and always out, and Roberta is there because her mother is sick.

The story is told from Twyla's point-of-view. Early on, she recalls the orchard at the shelter, though she does not know why this place stands out so poignantly to her in her memory. She then segues into a memory of Maggie, a mute woman who worked in the shelter's kitchen. Twyla recalls how Maggie fell down in the orchard and no one went to her aid. Instead, the older girls taunted her and called her names. Looking back, Twyla admits that she is ashamed of the event and of not going to Maggie's aide.

The girls go to church with their mothers one Sunday, are initially excited about the excursion. Though Twyla feels embarrassed by her mother, Mary, and her casual demeanor, she is also proud because her mother is very attractive. By contrast, Roberta's mother is dressed more formally, wears a large cross and carries a Bible. Roberta attempts to introduce the two women, but her mother refuses to shake Mary's hand, which angers Mary. Mary curses out loud in response to the slight, further embarrassing Twyla. The contrast between the two mothers is further highlighted when, after the service, Roberta becomes so full from the food her mother brought along that she cannot finish her food. Mary and Twyla, on the other hand, eat Easter candy as Mary has not packed a meal for Twyla.

Roberta soon leaves the shelter, and Twyla does not see her for quite a while. When the two encounter each other again, Twyla is a waitress at a Howard Johnson hotel. Roberta enters with friends and tells her old acquaintance that they are all on their way to see Jimi Hendrix perform. When Twyla confesses that she does not know who Hendrix is, Roberta calls her an asshole. Twyla naturally takes offense, and replies by asking Roberta about her mother while replying that her own mother is still attractive and healthy.

The next encounter between the two girls comes when Twyla is twenty-eight years old and married. She now lives in a rather nondescript town, Newburgh, and goes shopping one day at the town's new mall. While at the market, she sees Roberta again. Roberta is now married to a rich executive, and greets Twyla warmly, considering their last encounter. As they talk, the event concerning Maggie resurfaces, and Roberta recalls that Maggie was pushed by the older girls

as opposed to falling down on her own, which is how Twyla remembers it. The revelation makes Twyla feel uncomfortable about the event again, which then causes her to bring up the encounter at the Howard Johnson hotel. Roberta brushes off the event, chalking it up to the whole “black-white” issue of the day. Seemingly on better terms, the two women promise to keep in touch with one another.

The two women again meet each other amidst the racial tension of busing in Newburgh. Twyla’s son, Joseph, has to take a bus to a school in a different area as busing has been instituted to integrate schools. One day, Twyla drives by the school her son will attend and sees Roberta picketing. She is picketing with a group of dissenters against busing. When she stops to talk with Roberta, they begin addressing the issue of busing, and their talk soon turns into a heated argument. The picketers, angered, surround Twyla’s car and begin rocking it back and forth. Though Twyla reaches out to Roberta for help, Roberta refuses to help her. The tension is finally broken up when the police arrive and help Twyla. Roberta then says to Twyla that she is just as she was when they were in the shelter, and that she kicked Maggie, who was black, while she was on the ground. Twyla denies kicking Maggie, and insists that Maggie was not black.

Over several weeks of picketing and tension, Twyla stands on the picket line opposite Roberta. Her signs, however, become increasingly personal, to the extent that she asks Roberta how her mother is via the signs. After the picketing abates, the two women do not interact again for some time. When she finally sees Roberta again, Roberta is coming from a glitzy party. Twyla has been concerned the entire time about what Roberta said about Maggie during their last encounter. As if on the same page, Roberta approaches Twyla and brings the issue up. She admits that the two girls never really kicked Maggie, but that she had wanted to kick her. Also, she thought Maggie was black at the time, so her wanting to kick a black woman is tantamount to the action itself, to which Roberta then starts crying. Twyla thanks Roberta for the truth, and admits that her mother never stopped dancing, while Roberta admits that her mother never got well. The narrative ends with a crying Roberta wondering what happened to Maggie.

The “black-white” issue, as Roberta calls it, is a powerful theme in the narrative. Morrison shows through her narrative how the racial tensions of the day were so strong that they were even able to divide two people who seemingly care for each other and shared important life moments together. Roberta’s actions show how deep hatred can go. More importantly, it shows how hatred of others, such as racial hate, can often spring from a place of self-hatred. Roberta is angry at herself for what she did and did not do in response to Maggie’s treatment when they were children. She has carried this anger her entire life, and the reader sees that she uses it to lash out at others, such as Twyla. As such, Morrison critiques the underlying reasons and justifications for hatred, showing how the individual needs to grow in order for society as a whole to grow. Moreover, Morrison shows how effective strong relationships, communication and community are. The power of connection between Twyla and Roberta allows Roberta to finally admit her fears, and as such, provides a starting point for growth and forgiveness. The story ends on an ambiguous note, meaning that the two women might become friends again or, like the story has shown us so far, might be divided based on racial tensions.