

Questions on “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison:

1. At the end of “Recitatif”, how do Twyla’s and Roberta’s explorations of the “truth” of what they had seen at St. Bonny’s many years earlier affect your sense of the “truth” of later episodes in the story? Is either Twyla or Roberta more reliable than the other?
2. At what point in the story do you first begin to make assumptions about the race and class of the two main characters, Twyla and Roberta? Why? Do you change your mind later in the story? When and why so - or not? What is the significance of Morrison’s choice both to withhold information about the character’s race and class and to have Twyla narrate the story?
3. How does the relationship between Twyla and Roberta evolve over the course of the story?
4. Twyla and Roberta both have mothers who abandon them emotionally but not necessarily physically. How might that affect a young girl’s notion of self-worth? On whom or what would she depend for validation?
5. To what extent, if at all, does Maggie’s race make a difference?
6. Why doesn’t Roberta seem overly bothered by the attack on Maggie and whether she and Twyla only watched or actually participated in the attack?
7. Why do you think Twyla is so deeply affected by Roberta’s stand about busing her children to another school? What does she mean by her placard, “-And so do children *****” mean?
8. When the two women meet in the last episode, Roberta says, “Oh, shit, Twyla. Shit, shit, shit. Well what the hell happened to Maggie” What does the use of profanity and the sentiment expressed reveal about Roberta’s character?
9. What does recitatif mean? How is it different from an aria? How does that meaning illuminate the stakes of this story?