

Heather Stewart
HCOM 324, 3-15-18
Prof. Umi Vaughan

Midterm Essay - African American Narratives

Words, language, storytelling, communication. The human word is the pinnacle of the human experience. From spoken stories that have preserved the history of mankind since the beginning of time to flowery, metaphorical poetry that expresses the most intimate of human emotions, the word is arguably the most basic unit of what it means to be human. Words have the ability to motivate, demonstrate, devastate, and placate.

“Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble.” Yehuda Berg

Through specific examples found in Toni Morrison’s 1993 Nobel Laureate Speech, I will show the importance of the human word. Additionally, I will demonstrate how African American narratives underscore key themes of the African American experience, specifically freedom and love, by examining the novels *47* and *The Color Purple*.

The importance of the human word is incalculable. Since the beginning of time, human language has been what differentiates mankind from other species on the planet. We are able to express abstract ideas, complex emotions, and we are able to

hurt each other with our words. We are able to preserve our histories and tell our stories and share information. The written word has allowed us to transfer knowledge through time and space, allowing information and ideas to be shared between generations and across oceans. In her 1993 Nobel Laureate Speech, Toni Morrison warns us not to underestimate the power of language and to take care to preserve its living, breathing potential. “The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers.” As one of the most brilliant and revered African American women of our time, with these poignant words, Morrison eloquently highlights the potential of language to unleash all the good that humans have to offer the world. Additionally she warns against allowing language to be used to oppress, denigrate, or malign one another.

“There will be more diplomatic language to countenance rape, torture, assassination. There is and will be more seductive, mutant language designed to throttle women, to pack their throats like paté-producing geese with their own unsayable, transgressive words; there will be more of the language of surveillance disguised as research; of politics and history calculated to render the suffering of millions mute...” (Morrison)

In this quote Morrison illuminates the potential of language to be used to harm and hinder one another. From the platform of her Nobel Laureate Speech, Toni Morrison beautifully and accurately reveals the importance of the human word. She warns us to safeguard against the abuses of language and inspires us to recognize the power of the word, both positive and negative.

As Toni Morrison so eloquently underscores in her speech, the potency of language can be seen in the revealing of specific themes within African American Narratives. Within the context of the African American experience, specific to the U.S. history of slavery and oppression, the theme of freedom is significant. Walter Mosley develops the theme of freedom in his Afrofuturistic novel, *47*. This story is set on a Georgia plantation in the mid 1800's during the time of slavery. The main character, a boy known simply by his slave identification number, 47, is guided by his friend and mentor, Tall John, to a deeper understanding of what it means to be free. Throughout the novel Tall John asserts, "Neither master nor nigger be". With these words, Tall John teaches 47 that freedom is a state of mind. Both the notion of master and slave (nigger) can only exist if one believes them to be real. Eventually 47 is able to develop his own idea of what it means to be free, "I realized that I was free even though I was clamped in chains and locked away. I was free because I had made the decision to run away if I could....I could see that the real chains that the slave wore were the color of his skin and the defeat in his mind. Neither master nor nigger be...There in the worst aspect of my slavery I came to fully understand those words' meaning. I felt the thrill of freedom in my heart." (146) Through his protagonist, Mosley puts forth the question: What does it mean to be free? He further challenges the reader to consider the notion that we are free if we believe we are free. This message is powerful and meaningful within the African American context where the physical and symbolic chains of oppression have plagued an entire group of people since the beginning.

Just as the theme of freedom is developed by Walter Mosley in his novel 47, the theme of love can be explored in Alice Walker's African American narrative, *The Color Purple*. Walker develops the theme through her main characters, specifically Celie, Shug Avery, Albert, and Nettie. These characters experience the ultimate highs and the crushing lows of the theme. For example, the main protagonist, Celie, doesn't experience a loving relationship with a partner until she meets her soulmate, Shug Avery. Celie's love for Shug is strong and unwavering even in the face of the ultimate heartbreak. The steadfast nature of Celie's love for Shug is exemplified in this quote as Shug tells Celie that she loves someone else, "Celie, she say, Do you love me? She down on her knees by now, tears falling all over the place. My heart hurt so much I can't believe it. How can it keep beating, feeling like this? But I'm a woman. I love you, I say. Whatever happen, whatever you do, I love you." (250-51) These words demonstrate the power of love even in the heartbreaking of situations. Through the antagonist, Albert, Walker explores the dark side of love and loss. It is revealed in the novel that Albert, Celie's beating, mistreating husband, was not allowed by his father to pursue his love for Shug Avery, as a young man. Subsequently, he is unhappy for the majority of his life and takes out his anger and hatred on Celie who he is married to but does not love. He is a miserable, mean man until he confronts his father. In this quote, Albert (referred to as Mr. _____), finally expresses to his father his regret in not pursuing love. In doing so, he sets himself free, "Mr._____ turn his head slow, watch his daddy drink. Then say, real sad, You ain't got it in you to understand, he say. I love Shug Avery. Always have, always will. I should have married her when I had the chance." At these words, Albert

takes off the shackles he has carried his entire life and gains back his freedom to follow his heart. This marks a turning point for the character. Before this statement he is a slave to his hatred and anger which cause him to be mean and to mistreat Celie. After he stands up to his father he sets himself free of the anger and his relationship with Celie begins to heal and develop anew. Finally, Walker explores the profound joy people experience when they recognize a love that has been there all along. This idea is exemplified by the following quote as Nettie, Celie's sister, describes her love for Samuel, "You may have guessed that I loved him all along; but I did not know it. Oh, I loved him as a brother and respected him as a friend, but Celie, I love him bodily, as a man! I love his walk, his size, his shape, his smell, the kinkiness of his hair. I love the very texture of his palms. The pink of his inner lip. I love his big nose. I love his brows. I love his feet. And I love his dear eyes in which the vulnerability and beauty of his soul can be plainly read." (238) These words perfectly portray the beauty profound depth of human love in its purest form.

The power of the word, whether it be spoken, written, whispered, sung, chanted, or sketched is immeasurable. Through the examination of Toni Morrison's words in her Nobel Laureate Speech, to the development of the themes of freedom and love as seen in the African American narratives 47 and *The Color Purple*, we see the potential of language to inspire and educate within the context of the African American experience. I have spent this life walking around in a white, privileged, middle class body. I will never truly know what it means to be black. But through the words of Toni Morrison, Walter

Mosley, and Alice Walker I am one step closer to being free from the shackles of my ignorance. "We cannot be free until they are free." (Baldwin, 10)

Heather Stewart
HCOM 312, 2-18-18
Dr. Umi Vaughan

Close Reading Exercise - The Color Purple

1. Recurring words, images, etc: Dear God, no good, scared, sick, Mr., write, letter, Dear Nettie, Your loving sister, husband, sing, love, Africa, village, my people, Amen

2. *“Well, us talk and talk about God, but I’m still adrift. Trying to chase that old white man out of my head. I been so busy thinking bout him I never truly notice nothing God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing. . . .Man corrupt everything, say Shug. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you trying to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost, say Shug. Conjure up the flowers, wind, water, a big rock.....Every time I conjure up a rock, I throw it.” pg. 196-7*

3. Relationship with god, gender roles/stereotypes, bond between sisters/women, enduring power of love

4. One of the prevailing themes in the Color Purple, by Alice Walker, is the relationship each of us develops with our own unique image of “god”. For some of us, that image is of “an old white man” sitting at the entrance of Heaven. For others, including myself, god is “flowers, wind, water, a big rock”. For me, with regard to organized religion, through the ages, “man corrupt everything”. Man fought wars, tried to obliterate entire groups of people, and man has justified this action by telling himself, “‘you think he God.’ But he ain’t.” He can’t be. God can’t possibly “try to make you think he everywhere” if “everywhere” is war, and suffering, and “old white man” oppressing the rest of us. Throughout history “Man plop himself on the other end” of these crimes against humanity and he “talk and talk about God”, “until you think he God. But he ain’t.” When I think about god, my god, “I’m still adrift” on the “flowers, wind, water”, surrounded by the “the color purple”. I find this reference to “the color purple” as referring to the magic that is the color purple when you come across it in nature. It’s rare. And it’s exquisite. We see a lot of blue, green, and brown in nature. But there are other colors, including purple that aren’t seen as often in nature. However, when you least expect it and I would argue, when you need it the most, nature provides you with a little magic, “the color purple”. “Make you think he everywhere.”

5. My parents raised us in a home where we had complete and total freedom of religion. As my personal image and relationship with god evolved during my childhood, the image that resonated the most for me was that of god being nature. I feel a spiritual closeness to something “larger” than myself when I am surrounded by nature. I’ve never

been able to get behind an image of god being “an old white man”. That has never made any sense to me. The lack of humility on the part of man to assume that “God” is a white man is offensive to me and always has been. Alice Walker’s characterization of the image of god through Shug’s eyes was so lovely for me to read. She was able to describe the image of god that I have always imagined but have a hard time putting into words. Shug’s description of god being “flowers, wind, water, a big rock” (pg. 127) totally jives with how I feel about god. Amen.

Heather Stewart
HCOM 324, 2-25-18
Prof. Umi Vaughan

Close Reading Exercise - Home to Harlem

1. Harlem; cabaret; Scotch; Congo; chocolate, brown-skin, legs, dancing, gin, party, sex, Baltimore, railroad, Pullman porters, waiter
2. “ Jake did not care....It was rank” pg. 114 & “Ray felt alone....he would like to be like him...” Pg. 194
3. Gender roles; Racial discrimination; search for love; search for self identity
4. Throughout the novel, “Home to Harlem” we see a recurring theme of “the search for self identity”. As the main character, Jake, “falls naturally into the rhythm” of one relationship to the next, he begins to find himself. After losing track of Felice, he feels “alone and a little sorry for himself”. He takes solace in bouncing from one Harlem cabaret to the next, “touched by the spirit of that atmosphere”. Drinking and gambling and carousing the streets of Harlem filled the vacancy as he tries to figure out who he is. As he develops relationships and friendships with various characters like Zeddy and Ray he thinks to himself, “ I ‘would like to be like him’”. He tries on the different personas of his friends. For example, he follows in Zeddy’s footsteps by moving in with Rose purely for the convenience of it, as Zeddy had done with Gin Susie. Even though Jake “did not love her, had never felt any deep desire for her.” But his heart still belonged to Felice and Rose, “was not his charming little brown-skin of the Baltimore.” Through the development of the novel, Jake’s memory of Felice “lived in his mind a highly

magnified affair”. Eventually his adventures lead him back to Felice and by then Jake is at a point in life where he is in “a fever mood for a steady mate”. Finding Felice is a significant step in finding himself and discovering another piece to the puzzle of self identity.

5. I ended up choosing two different passages because I couldn't find just one that had enough meat for me to be able to find the words I needed to express my sentiments about the main theme of this novel: the search for self identity. The first passage I chose is actually focuses on the character of Ray as he reflects on wishing to be more like Jake. He and Jake have gone to Philadelphia to Madame Laura's house and he is feeling lonesome and sorry for himself. He feels envious of Jake as he struggles to find his place not only at Madame Laura's but in the world. This passage highlights the theme of search for self identity that touch both Jake and Ray. The second passage is in the first part right before Jake hits Rose. I found this passage interesting because after Jake hits Rose he is disgusted with himself. As Jake struggles with self identity he tries on the personas of the people around him. In this case, as Zeddy had done with Gin Susie, Jake moves in with Rose, even though he doesn't care much for her. She is convenient and Jake is experimenting with being a “man of convenience” as he has seen Zeddy be. In the end, Rose is more enamored than ever with Jake because he hits her, which disgusts him and he moves out. He learns, through his relationship with Rose, that he is not a “man of convenience”. This realization brings him one step further down the path to self discovery.

Heather Stewart
HCOM 324, 3-13-18
Prof. Umi Vaughan

Close Reading Exercise - "47"

1. Chains, slave, cotton, master, kill, ugly, pickin', Wall, Universe, "Neither master nor nigger be", freedom
2. "Deep in my mind...I felt the thrill of freedom in my heart." (pg. 146, para. 2)
3. Themes: freedom, friendship, loyalty, self discovery
4. Of the various themes presented by Walter Mosley in his novel "47" the one that stood out the most to me is "freedom". Tall John spends the duration of the story trying to convince 47 that "neither master nor nigger be". Eventually 47 realizes that this means he is "free even though (he) was clamped in chains and locked away." Although this may be considered a "radical thought" by some, Mosley asserts the notion that freedom is not something that can be given or taken away. Freedom is a state of mind. If one believes he/she is free then he/she is in fact, free, because to be free is to feel free. To be free is to recognize the choices one has in life to make various decisions. For example, someone who is physically incarcerated, may not be free to leave the confines of their prison, but they are free to decide how they will treat others, how they will spend their free time in prison, and how they define the terms of their confinement to themselves. Alternatively, someone who is not physically incarcerated is still restricted with regard to the options they have for themselves. For example, just because

someone is not incarcerated doesn't mean that they are "free" to do anything they want. They can't rob a store, visit the moon, or drive on the wrong side of the road without consequences. Even in the time of slavery, Tall John teaches 47 that "(he) was free because (he) had made the decision to run away." Although 47 knew he would have significant consequences he realized that by deciding to run away, he had declared his freedom, at least to himself. 47 comes to understand "that the real chains that the slave wore were the color of his skin and the defeat in his mind." And with that understanding 47 "felt the thrill of freedom in (his) heart" for the first time in his life.

5. I really appreciated this passage from the book and the overall theme of freedom presented by Mosley. I hadn't considered the idea that we are all both "free" and not "free" in various aspects of our lives. This section made me think of the quote from *The Fire Next Time*: "We cannot be free until they are free." This quote made me realize that even those of us who are considered and who consider ourselves to be "free" really are only free in our perception of being free. Conversely, anyone who is generally considered to be "not free" can indeed find freedom if they so choose to establish that state of mind for themselves. Furthermore, those of us who are considered "free" may not actually be free at all when we consider the societal chains that we bare (ie; society notions of good vs. bad, perpetuations of racial stereotypes, persistence of untruths by our government). Going back to the quote from *The Fire Next Time* I realize that I, myself, am bound by the aforementioned societal chains and the first step in

being free of them is acknowledging their existence and then making the decision to shake free of them.

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