

PARADISE LOST AND FOUND: DUALISM
AND EDENIC MYTH IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*

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Toni Morrison's fiction embodies a powerful critique of dualistic thinking. Dualism—any system of thought that polarizes what we perceive—is a narrowing world view, for it inevitably cuts the individual off from the “other,” the not-I or the not-good or the not-ordered. Dualism creates warring antitheses: the “other” is an enemy to strive with and, ideally, to dominate. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests that Christianity, as “the heir of both classical Neo-Platonism and apocalyptic Judaism” embodies a dualistic world view that leads to authoritarianism and sexism:

All the basic dualities—the alienation of the mind from the body; the alienation of the subjective self from the objective world; the subjective retreat of the individual, alienated from the social community; the domination or rejection of nature by spirit—these all have roots in the apocalyptic-Platonic religious heritage of classical Christianity. But the alienation of the masculine from the feminine is the primary sexual symbolism that sums up all these alienations. The psychic traits of intellectuality, transcendent spirit, and autonomous will that were identified with the male left the woman with the contrary traits of bodiliness, sensuality, and subjugation. (44)

Ruether argues that male subjugation of the female is “the primary psychic model for . . . oppressor-oppressed relationships between social classes, races and nations” (46). Similarly, Mary Daly asserts that “the projection of ‘the other’—easily adaptable to national, racial and class differences—has basically and primordially been directed against women. Even the rhetoric of racism finds its model in sexism” (61).¹

¹For further discussion of dualism in modern Western religion and culture, see Rita Nakashima Brock, “The Feminist Redemption of Christ,” in *Christian Femi-*

In her novels, Morrison continually requires us to confront the quite literally self-defeating and self-destructive qualities of dualistic thinking, demonstrating that half a reality is insufficient for anyone. Confronting her readers with the dangers of our customary way of perceiving the world, Morrison also suggests that transcending dualism is one ideal, imaginable route beyond our culturally ingrained and religiously sanctioned sexism, racism, and other self-narrowing dogmas. She knows, however, that we are all so mired in dualism that she must shake the world, mix it, and stand it on end before we can have even a glimmering of what a nondualistic existence might be.

It is in *Tar Baby* that Morrison's critique of dualism — sexism, primarily, but also racism and class distinction — finds fullest realization; however, for her characters, dualistic thinking has long been the enemy. In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola defines her world in terms of antitheses: there is the perfect, blond, blue-eyed, much-beloved Shirley Temple; then there is Pecola herself, all that is left over. The hatred and violence in her world, she is certain, emerge from the distance between her ideal and her actual, antithetical self. Nel's tragedy, in *Sula*, is also a product of her determinedly dualistic world view. When she discovers her husband Jude's infidelity with her best friend, Sula, Nel for the first time is forced to define a self apart from Sula. She falls into the trap of believing that the separate selves must be antithetical, representatives of simply defined polarities of good and evil. Only near the end of the novel is she required to question her tidy morality and finally to recognize all that she has deprived herself of by choosing not to be Nel, but rather not-Sula.

Song of Solomon further advances Morrison's challenge to dualistic thinking. In her presentation of Milkman Dead's quest, she begins to suggest that the trap of dualism is not inescapable. Milkman begins his life and indeed spends the first thirty years of it in a pat moral universe like Nel's. His mother is good and his father evil — or, easily, the reverse. His father is order; Pilate is disorder: Milkman tries to choose and never can, because the disjunction he insists on is false. Only as he labors in his quest does he gradually come to realize that the lines he has so darkly drawn between perceived dualities have not

nism: Visions of a New Humanity, ed. Judith L. Weidman (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 58, 60–61. In *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), see Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "Women in the Early Christian Movement," 86, and "Feminist Spirituality, Christian Identity, and Catholic Vision," 141–43; and Eleanor L. McLaughlin, "The Christian Past: Does it Hold a Future for Women?" 94.

helped but hindered him in his search for identity. In the novel's final paragraph, when Milkman and Guitar, life and death, victory and surrender all merge, Milkman truly triumphs.

In *Tar Baby* Morrison stands the world on end remorselessly, attacking dualism on every front. One of her most effective techniques involves her telling us a story we already know very well indeed, the myth of Eden. As John Irving asserts, this is "a novel deeply perceptive of the black's desire to create a mythology of his own to replace the stereotypes and myths the white man has constructed for him" (31). Morrison recasts the Genesis story in such a way that its dualism is upset and its moral absolutes evaporate. She also merges the Genesis story with the tar baby folk tale that gives the novel its name. In the convergence of these retold stories, Morrison defines a world where our customary definitions do not stick, where human potential is enhanced precisely to the degree that dualism is transcended. How far can dualism be transcended? The novel leaves that question open, but the possibility of self-redemption flavors its conclusion.

The tar baby story and the myth of Eden are both stories of creation, the creation of human beings, or what passes for them, from such unpromising material as clay or tar. They are also stories about temptation and entrapment, the fall from grace, and redemption. Morrison's interest in these two overlapping stories lies in part in their adaptability to her critique of dualism. The version of the Genesis story she invokes most sharply is Milton's, and this adds an edge of ironic humor to the novel. By drawing misogynist Milton into the service of this work, Morrison finds yet another way, a delightfully amusing one, of reminding us that nothing need be what it seems. In fact, all things can be their "opposites": no territory is forbidden to the self in the act of self-creation.

Tar Baby echoes Milton's subject at every turning. The novel's setting is fully a character, and it is a character, like the others, that shimmers with its abilities to be both A and not-A. The Isle des Chevaliers disturbs protagonist Jadine with its excess: "The island exaggerated everything. Too much light. Too much shadow. Too much rain. Too much foliage and much too much sleep" (57). By endowing her island with such excess, Morrison can easily make of it both Eden and hell. The first glimpse Morrison gives us of her island puts trees and snakes in the foreground: "Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms" (7). The Isle des

Chevaliers is certainly a tropical paradise, like Milton's, a "happy Isle" (II, 410), with its "hills and vales so bountiful it made visitors tired to look at them: bougainvillea, avocado, poinsettia, lime, banana, coconut and the last of the rain forest's champion trees" (8). Yet the island is not all paradise: beneath the hills lies the swamp, Sein de Vieilles: "And witch's tit it was: a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near" (8). In this pitchy lake, Jadine will later nearly sink, thinking that "perhaps she was supposed to lie horizontally" (156). The image recalls to the reader that of Milton's Satan "rolling in the fiery Gulf" (I, 52). Her "burning" legs (158) also enhance that parallel, while at the same time the episode makes of Jadine the tar baby Son will later tell her she is. "'Jesus, what is that stuff,'" another character asks. "'It looks like pitch'" (158).

The swamp is a product of the diverting of the river, a human interference with natural process. Morrison's critique of dualism is operating here, for, as Ruether argues, dualistic thinking—the alienation of consciousness from nature—has resulted in "religious sanction for modern technological exploitation of the earth" (49). At the Isle des Chevaliers, men had

folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way. The clouds gathered together, stood still and watched the river scuttle around the forest floor, crash headlong into the haunches of hills with no notion of where it was going, until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea. (7)

The description invites comparison with Milton's in Book I of *Paradise Lost*: the fallen angels' rape of the infernal landscape in preparation for constructing Pandemonium. Like the developers at Isle des Chevaliers, those spirits "Ransack'd the Center, and with impious hands / Riff'd the bowels of thir mother Earth / For Treasures better hid" (I, 686–88).

For Morrison's developers, the treasures are the building lots themselves, where luxury estates will be built. Chief among these is Valerian Street's l'Arbe de la Croix, the house wherein most of the novel's action takes place. The name is a tease: "arbe" is not quite "arbre," yet we think of tree, increasingly, in this context, of the primeval tree of Paradise. The "croix" foreshadows the agony that the house's inhabitants

will experience and the redemption they may or may not attain to. But the tree and the cross are also apparent polarities that, upon closer examination, merge: medieval tradition has it that the cross on which Jesus was crucified was constructed from the Tree of Knowledge.

L'Arbe de la Croix, like both Satan's Pandemonium and God's Heaven, is a magnificent, elaborately constructed mansion. Valerian Street's house, like Satan's, is the product of first-rate craftsmanship and the object of enthusiastic praise. Yet the house's most remarkable feature is its natural quality: it is gardenlike in being "wide, breezy and full of light" (8), in not "looking 'designed'" (8-9); and its greenhouse seems to some critics to be *de trop*. But even Pandemonium rivalled nature with its lamps that "yielded light / As from a sky" (I, 729-30). A house is not, after all, a garden, and the greenhouse serves as a reminder of how easily the apparent polarities, artifice and nature, can overlap and merge. It is as much the heavenly mansion Milton describes in Book III of his epic as it is either Satan's palace or Adam's first home.

Morrison's richly allusive prose effects the superimposition of one half of our dualistic world view upon the other. Thus, we begin to achieve an integrated perspective, not only of setting but also of characters. At first seeming a godlike controller of others' destinies, Valerian Street, the wealthy, white owner, presides over his "paradise." Sitting in his greenhouse among "the peonies, the anemones and all their kind" (9), he evokes Milton's Satan's image of a God who "Lordly sits / Our envied Sovran, and his Altar breathes / Ambrosial Odors and Ambrosial Flowers, / Our servile offerings" (II, 243-46). Sydney, his butler, asserts, "I've known him practically all his life and I'll tell you this: he gets his way" (31). He is a creator not only in his "creation" of the setting, but also in his making Margaret, Sydney, Ondine, and Jade much of what they are. Jade is, at least in Son's view, the "tar baby" of Valerian's creation, and Morrison slyly lets us know that the candy magnate has appropriate credentials to undertake such an act of creation: "Valerians," the candy named for him, and which his company continues to produce—"made from the syrup sludge left over from their main confection" (42)—are tar babies, too.

Valerian directs his creatures' lives, and he seems a largely benevolent deity. Of his servants Sydney and Ondine, for example, he says with considerable justification, "I have always taken care of them" (25). But he is also capricious, and his petty attacks on Margaret are detestable, though she sees him as "some lord or priest who doubted her confession" (73) when he is at his most unkind. Perhaps he is,

more than anything else, the image of a white man's god, that is, the white man *as* God, unquestionable especially by the likes of his black servants and the black outsider, Son. He is therefore a seriously flawed God, given the totality of Judeo-Christian belief. His emperor's name and his "head-of-a-coin profile" are contrasted with the novel's conspicuous emperor butterflies, who have true dominion on the island, while Valerian is merely the false coinage of an emperor. Indeed, the Roman Emperor Valerian (253 C.E.), although famous for his campaigns against the Persians, was eventually surrounded and captured by enemy horsemen and held prisoner for the rest of his life. Valerian Street may initially dominate the Isle of the Horsemen, but he certainly ends his days in apparent captivity. The name, the profile, Valerian's belief in "industry" (opposed to Son's in "fraternity") – all these qualities suggest that what is due Valerian is what was rendered unto Caesar, that spiritual currency has some other source and destination.

Valerian may have godlike powers over his creatures, but even he acknowledges that there are things outside his control, things for which he "can't be responsible" (60). This notion of responsibility is at the heart of the terrible innocence that prevents him from seeing or foreseeing the effects of their exercise. He cannot see what will happen when he uproots Margaret and brings her into his world; he does not foresee the disastrous results of his whim to share his holiday dinner with Son and the servants as well as with Jade and Margaret. On that occasion, "nobody was in his proper place" (167) in Valerian's rigid hierarchy, and by the end of the evening he realizes that "he had played a silly game, and everyone was out of place" (179). He has long permitted arbitrary roles and values to blind him and must at last convict himself of being "guilty . . . of innocence" (209).

Valerian can be culpably innocent because his view of sin is too simplistic. He is mired in the traditional view of original sin: for him, it is disobedience to higher authority. As Sydney puts it, "'What he wants is for people to do what he says do'" (139–40). Since Valerian is the highest authority in his world, he feels justified in all he does, including his remaining aloof from those he ought to know and understand. Morrison restages Adam and Eve's fall, using relatively minor characters, to enable us to question the tradition. Gideon is, like Adam, a gardener in paradise (94); Thérèse has a "craving for apples" (93) and an equal craving for such knowledge as she is not already master of (128–30). When Gideon and Thérèse steal his apples, Valerian judges them and exiles them from Eden.

But knowledge cannot be sin, in Morrison's world view: the theft catalyzes the release of much long-hidden knowledge, and it is therefore not a culpable action. Valerian's treatment of Gideon and Thérèse, Son believes, "would outrage Satan himself" (174). Son's rage at Valerian comes from his perception of a larger picture in which it is Valerian who is guilty (both of excess and of innocence), while Gideon and Thérèse are entitled to what they have appropriated. For Morrison, the fall is a falling away from nature, one's human nature as well as the natural world. The real original sin, Morrison seems to say, is dualism, the either-or vision that deprives us of knowledge as it fragments and distorts the world.

Theologian Valerie Saiving calls for theology to "redefine its categories of sin and redemption" (41). Morrison has forged such a theology. To move us toward knowledge of what sin is, she defines what it is not. Just so, in redefining redemption, she begins by *undefining* it. Redemption cannot come from Valerian for more reasons than one. Granted, he has married Margaret, who is endowed with some Marian attributes: her cross (58–59), her simplicity and humble origins, her beauty so stunning that "the moment he saw her something inside him knelt down" (13). But there are many ways in which she is antithetical to the Christian Virgin, and the island's "Marys," including Thérèse of the magic breasts, are reminders of that ironic distance. Margaret is a very far from perfect mother, and the Marys may be judging her, among others, by their refusal to enter l'Arbe de la Croix (34). Margaret nevertheless bears Valerian's only-begotten son, Michael, and she sees him as Christlike. She speaks of her view

that he loved people, was not selfish, was actually self-sacrificing, committed, that he could have lived practically any kind of life he chose, could be dissolute, reckless, trivial, greedy. But he wasn't. He had not turned out that way. He could have been president of the candy company if he had wanted, but he wanted value in his life, not money. He had turned out fine, just fine. (171)

But Michael, whom the reader never meets in the novel's present, may not have turned out so fine. Margaret's physical abuse has damaged him, perhaps irreparably, and Michael's conspicuous absence throughout the novel's action is an emblem of failed redemption. Of course Michael is "sacrificed," too, as a direct result of Valerian's culpable innocence, his uprooting of Margaret, and his failure to help her become rooted in the alien soil in which he so shallowly transplants her. We are invited to contrast his irresponsibility toward Margaret

with all his careful work in the greenhouse: he will transplant hydrangeas from Philadelphia to the Caribbean and see that they grow, but he will not begin to do the same for his wife. When Valerian finally is robbed of his innocence and given the knowledge that Margaret abused Michael, indeed his world is *uncreated*. He imagines his tiny son thinking that

no world in the world would be imagined, thought up, or even accidentally formed not to say say say say *created* that would permit such a thing to happen. And he is right. No world in the world would allow it. So this is not the world at all. It must be something else. I have lived in it and I will die out of it but it is not the world. This is not life. This is some other thing. (202)

Valerian, the traditional God, is dethroned and his world is uncreated. Meanwhile, Son's role in the novel undergoes a startling metamorphosis. The name "Son" is the most overt of Morrison's Miltonic allusions in the novel, and the character is the most spectacular demonstration of the limitations of dualistic thinking. When we first see Son at Isle des Chevaliers, he is clearly satanic, an intruder in Eden, a terrifying, threatening figure, a man with "hair like snakes" (149). His attachment to his "original dime" may initially be puzzling, but the phrase suggests some connection with "original sin," and he is certainly a temptation to Jadine. Even his belief in fraternity connects him with Satan, for Milton tells us that "Devil with Devil damn'd / Firm concord holds, men only disagree / Of Creatures rational" (II, 496–98). Star imagery associates Son with Lucifer: Son is "as silent as a star" (89), and Jadine will find it "so very hard to forget the man who fucked like a star" (251).

Son strongly evokes the traditional Satan: like Milton's, he brings out the intrinsic "evil" in others. But, as Gideon's and Thérèse's theft demonstrates, traditional "evil" is actually no more than the challenge to authority and the liberation of knowledge. Morrison underlines this imagistically when Ondine, in the act of revealing her long-suppressed knowledge of Margaret's guilt, has "her diadem braids turned into horns" (180). Son too is Satanlike (or "Satan Hero"-like) in catalyzing the release of knowledge, in challenging Valerian's authority, feeling justified in so doing because he knows his own worth and he knows it is independent of Valerian's actions or assessments. He tempts away Valerian's prize "creature," though not without himself being tempted.

Quickly transformed by a shower, new clothes, and Paco Rabanne into a man "so beautiful" (112) that even Margaret and Jadine are

dazzled, Son upsets the system we were encouraged to lock him into. Indeed, light images characterize him from the outset, even setting the scene for Margaret's discovery of him in her closet when she is thinking about the poetic line, "And he glittered when he walked" (73). Transformed from serpent to spirit of light, he becomes plausible as a redeemer who may rescue Jadine from Valerian's world. The very actions that initially evoked the satanic now require us to see Son as its opposite. It is, after all, Son's intrusion into Valerian's troubled Eden that ultimately precipitates everyone's return to his or her true self. By the novel's conclusion, Margaret, Sydney, Ondine, Jade, even Valerian himself are liberated from the false and stressful positions they occupied in Valerian's hollow hierarchy. Son is no tidy evil opposite some absolute good embodied in Valerian. On the contrary, he appears at first as a power untrammelled by dualistic limitations, a power that surpasses even Valerian's "Christian," white, male, capitalist supremacy. Morrison underlines this still further by alluding to another mythic system. Son is always the "chocolate eater" to prophetic Thérèse: Morrison may be invoking the Aztec veneration of a chocolate drink they believed to be the gods' food.

But Son is flawed, like Valerian, by a crucial lack of knowledge. Pearl K. Bell argues that "Only a man like Son, in sure possession of ancestral values, can redeem Jadine, who has sacrificed her tribal soul to 'white' sophistication and learning" (57). But Bell's view suffers from the limitations of dualistic thinking, and, finally, so does Son's. Paradoxically, though he can be both A and not-A, his world view is narrowed by both sexism and racism. Son fails to understand that Jadine is his equal, another imbiber of chocolate (31, 71), who is as much a tempter and savior as he. Son perceives her as a tar baby (232-33), a white man's creation that tempts and entraps him, but if a tar baby has been created at all, Son has been the creator, when, watching Jade sleep, he labored "to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistency" (102).

Son's friend Soldier is closer to the truth when he tells Jadine that Son "wouldn't know a good woman from a snake" (219). That is, Jadine is satanic in very much the same way Son is. Trapped in the pitchy swamp, she evokes Milton's Satan, and she tempts Son not because she is Valerian's creation, but because she is her own. It is she who gives Son back his "original dime" (234) and lets him know that it is not the emblem of personal achievement he had always taken it to be, but rather a seal of his existence as a "Mama-spoiled black man" (232). When he tempts her away, "He saw it all as a rescue: first

tearing her mind away from that blinding awe. Then the physical escape from the plantation" (189). But Son cannot see that she is as much his potential savior as he is hers:

She thought she was rescuing him from the night women who wanted him for themselves, wanted him feeling superior in a cradle, deferring to him; wanted her to settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building. He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning *them*, the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years had killed a world millions of years old. . . . Each was pulling the other away from the maw of hell—its very ridge top. Each knew the world as it was meant or ought to be. (231–32)

In fact, neither can finally save the other. Each has a personal vision of paradise that is remote from the other's, and Son's separatist ideology (181) is as far from realization as is Jadine's dream of a world in which no lines need be drawn. New York City may be for Jade a "happy Isle"—indeed, it "made her feel like giggling" (190)—but it is not in the city that Jadine and Son find their paradise. For them the phenomena of the external world vanish altogether: "Vaguely aware of such things when they were apart, together they could not concentrate on the given world. They reinvented it, remembered it through the other" (198). And Eloë is not Eden, either, though we may be lulled briefly into making the too-simple connection. Even Son ceases to see Eloë as paradisaical after he has lost Jade, when he looks at photographs she took on their trip and finds their radiance gone: "It all looked miserable in the photographs, sad, poor and even poor-spirited" (254).

What then is redemption in this novel's world and whence can it come? If original sin is not disobedience to an arbitrarily "higher" authority, but rather a falling away from—or failure ever to discover—one's own true nature, then redemption must be the reclaiming of that nature, that self. Redemption must involve the discovery or rediscovery that, to be truly meaningful, the voice of authority must come from within; it must not arise from some arbitrary system. Jadine is the novel's hero because she is from the beginning insistent on not being limited by dualism. Carol P. Christ's description of women's spiritual quest applies well to Jadine: "Women's new naming of self and world often reflects wholeness, a movement toward overcoming the dualisms of self and world, body and soul, nature and spirit, rational and emotional, which have plagued Western consciousness" (13–14).

Jadine refuses to choose between the apparent opposites offered her — “blackening up or universalizing out” (54); that is, she refuses to internalize an external image — either black or white — as a definition of self. “I belong to me” (101), Jadine tells Son, and she becomes most outraged at him in their initial encounter when he tries to impose a dualistic, defining vision on her:

“as soon as you let me loose I am going to kill you. For that alone. Just for that. For pulling that black-woman-white-woman shit on me. Never mind the rest. What you said before, that was nasty and mean, but if you think you can get away with telling me what a black woman is or ought to be . . .” (104)

She seems to know what Cynthia A. Davis asserts in her analysis of Morrison’s earlier novels:

The problem with such internalization is . . . that it is life-denying, eliminating “the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions” (*The Bluest Eye*, pp. 48, 64). One who really accepts the external definition of the self gives up spontaneous feeling and choice. (326)

Jadine is determined to be “only the person inside — not American — not black — just me” (40), and the enormity of her ambition can be assessed in terms of the traditional view of evil, of Satan’s fall. Jade wants to do what Milton’s Mammon counsels his fellow fallen angels to do, to

. . . seek
Our own good from ourselves, and from our own
Live to ourselves, though in this vast recess,
Free, and to none accountable. (II, 252–55)

Indeed, whatever help she has received from Valerian, her patron, and her aunt and uncle, Ondine and Sydney, it is not they but she who has established a career and earned a doctorate.

Yet Jadine is problematic as a hero. Part of the problem is that she defies our stereotype of the black woman as hero. We are accustomed to the heroic black woman who is deprived, downtrodden, who triumphs against enormous odds. The marvelous Celie in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* fits the image; Jadine does not:

If you had just been chosen for the cover of *Elle*, and there were three count three gorgeous and raucous men to telephone you or screech up to your door in Yugoslavian touring cars with Bordeaux Blanc and sandwiches and a little

C, and when you have a letter from a charming old man saying your orals were satisfactory to the committee— (37)

you are Jadine Childs, a very different sort of black female hero from the norm, but not a new one to Morrison's fictional world. In many ways Jade is the descendant of Sula, who knows well before her short life ends that she has "sung all the songs there are" (*Sula* 137). Jadine strikes many readers as spoiled and pampered, not heroic nor even likable. But embracing that assessment may reveal a strain of both racism and sexism. Why are readers not comfortable with Jadine? Why can't a black woman "have it all"—on her own terms—and ask for more?

Like other Morrison characters, Jadine is questing for and creating self (Lee 355). But because it is in many ways easier for her to know who she is not than who she is, the dangers of dualistic thinking beset her. Susan Willis is one of a group of critics who feel that Jade's failure to embrace a maternal role detracts seriously from her integrity. Calling Jade a cultural exile, Willis continues:

As the individual whose cultural exile is the most profound, Jadine is haunted by waking visions, born out of guilt and fear. In her most terrifying vision, a mob of black women—some familiar, some only known by their names—crowds into her room. Revealing, then waving their breasts at her, they condemn Jadine for having abandoned the traditional, maternal role of black women. (37)

But if Jadine's "rejection of traditional cultural roles" (Willis 37) cannot be disputed, she still merits the label Morrison gives her, "culture-bearing black woman" (232); she never finally embraces dualistic thinking. Son jabs at her by wondering *whose* culture she is bearing, but to ask that question is to succumb to the either-or vision the novel has presented as pernicious. The African "woman in yellow," whose apparent contempt for Jadine so unsettles her in Paris, is really, with her "skin like tar" (38), a tar baby to Jade: a dazzling temptation, but actually a trap, an illusion, not a valid object of desire or emulation. Peter B. Erickson notes the connection between the African woman and the swamp (18); however, he concludes that "the novel will not allow her [Jadine's] avoidance of motherhood to be perceived sympathetically" (29). But surely a nonmaternal Jadine is more attractive and laudable than the swamp women who, in all their "exceptional femaleness" (157), would gladly watch Jade sink in the slime. Sein de Vieilles does not nourish her; it attempts to destroy her.

In rejecting the breasts and eggs of the night women (225–26), Jadine need not be cutting herself off completely from her “ancient properties.” At twenty-five, she has many roles open to her and many discoveries yet to make about herself. While she refuses to define herself in maternal terms alone, as the night women seem to do, she is interested in nurturing both herself and others. One of the earliest images we are given of her shows her shopping for exotic ingredients to prepare a lavish meal for “all the people she loved and some she did not” (37). Although Thérèse insists to Son that Jade has “forgotten her ancient properties” (263), we need not trust Thérèse, who “love[s] lies” (130), with the final word. Dorothy H. Lee validly points out that the book is dedicated to women who “knew their true and ancient properties” (358), but Lee feels Jade must be excluded from their number. On the contrary, Jade may also know her true properties — or come to know them — but she refuses to be limited by anyone else’s definition of what they are. She must walk away from Ondine’s accusation that she is an inadequate daughter and woman (242–43), for she has fully accepted her responsibility to mother herself.

Both Jade and Son know, long before they know one another, that the individual’s only possible redeemer is self. They lose their grasp on the knowledge when they try to become one another’s Messiahs. But if their time together is in one sense a fall, it is also potentially part of their separate personal redemptions. In one another’s company, although they cannot stay there, they have experienced a world without the boundaries of dualism, each experiencing and perceiving “through the other” (198). At the novel’s end, Son seems to be absorbed into a mythic world, as he joins the blind horsemen of the island’s interior. But has Son thereby transcended conventional limitations? Lee associates the “Lickety-split. Looking neither to the left nor to the right” of his flight with the tar baby story: “Son, like and yet unhappily unlike Brer Rabbit, is to be seen at the end of the book running ‘lickety-split’ down the road but *toward* the source of his entrapment, alienated from his home and still ‘stuck on’ Jade” (356). Son’s situation also echoes that which he decried in the New York City men who “were looking neither to the right nor to the left” (185).² Then, in New York, Son was able to look “first to the right and then to the left” (186), seeing polarities, except in his moments of transcendence with Jade. Now

²For this observation, I am indebted to Laraine Yaeger, my former student at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She and her classmates who studied *Tar Baby* with me in the fall of 1984 stimulated many of the thoughts developed here.

he has not abandoned dualistic thinking: “It was all mixed up. He had it straight before: the pie ladies and the six-string banjo and then he was seduced, corrupted by cloisonné and raw silk the color of honey and he was willing to change, to love the cloisonné, to abandon the pie ladies” (257). But he has added to his dualism a single-mindedness that we feel—and Thérèse prophesies—to be doomed.

In contrast, Jade has—literally—embraced the extremes of traditional, patriarchal good and evil and found them one. It is Jade, newly aware of the many choices open to her, who shows potential for continued development and eventual self-redemption. She has chosen to leave Son’s paradise as well as Valerian’s, for neither holds her salvation:

She would go back to Paris and begin at Go. Let loose the dogs, tangle with the woman in yellow—with her and with all the night women who had *looked* at her. No more shoulders and limitless chests. No more dreams of safety. No more. Perhaps that was the thing—the thing Ondine was saying. A grown woman did not need safety or its dreams. She *was* the safety she longed for. (250)

The final image we are given of Jade, in which Morrison likens her to a soldier ant queen (250–51), is a deliberately antiromantic image of solitary fecundity designed to reinforce our knowledge that Jade must be alone in her act of self-redemption. Sex and romance are a very small part of what both the ants and Jadine are about: self-creation and self-perpetuation against the odds of the dualistic world.

Self-creation is hard work, and it is an artist’s work. Sula, Morrison tells us, was an “artist with no art form” (*Sula* 121), and Jadine “loved to paint and draw so it was unfair not to be good at it” (155). But both find their artistic medium in self-creation. In art and in self-creation alike, conscious creativity is to be valued above adherence to tradition and authority. As Jadine asserts the superiority of Picasso’s painting over the Itumba masks that inspired him, so Morrison has found *Paradise Lost* more useful to her purpose than Genesis unadorned. Like Milton in his epic, Morrison has set out to reinterpret myth. But while Milton sought to “justify the ways of God to men” (I, 26), Morrison’s purpose has been to urge us to transcend dualism and external authority, to be our own justification. Like the “colored girls” of Ntozake Shange’s choreopoem, who are “movin to the ends of their own rainbows” (67), Morrison’s Jadine marks the path of personal spiritual quest. Ideally, Jadine—and the reader who follows her—will some day echo the words of Shange’s Lady in Red:

i found god in myself
& i loved her / i loved her fiercely. (67)

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