Humor and Ambivalence in the Novels of Toni Morrison

Silvia Chirilă

ABSTRACT: Rarely can one find pure comedy in Toni Morrison's novels, as humor is usually either part of a double discourse in which traumatic experiences are "confronted" through a game of perspective, or a means of emphasizing a tragically flavored situation through situating it in a context open to ambivalence. If personal or collective tragedy cannot be eliminated, at least it can be counteracted, just as power relations can be influenced through humor. Apart from being a way of diminishing the tension of trauma or oppression, humor implies freedom of thought and interpretation even when dominant ideologies and discourses aim at enforcing specific institutionalized representations and definitions of self and other. At the same time, in Toni Morrison's novels "the comic twist" is represented as a way of displacement and a form of empowerment or healing for African Americans, even when it has to do with self-deprecation or self-irony, as pain becomes laughter and "a litany of humiliation, outrage and anger turned sickle-like back to themselves as humor" (Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*).

KEYWORDS: Toni Morrison, African American, humor, irony, paradox, double consciousness, tension

"**…**laughter is more serious. More
complicated, more serious than tears."
(Toni Morrison, *Jazz*).

Narrative identity is shaped in Toni Morrison's work through the interplay of binaries (white/black, male/female, individual/collective, centre/margin, civilization/wilderness, continuity/fragmentariness etc.). However this occurs in a process in which mere dichotomy is subverted in favor of ambivalence, hybridity, or hyphenation. In Toni Morrison's novels dualistic, polarized structures often become synergistic and binary logic is disrupted through multiplicity, inconsistency and paradox, while tension between opposing ideologies, perspectives, or (self-)images can be catalytic, leading to a redefinition of values and to a revision of meaning. We could say that many novels suggest a deconstruction of fixed identity markers related to race, class, or gender, emphasizing the role of 'institutionalized' discourses – or, to use Holstein's notion, "discourses-in-practice" (92)[1] – as well as of

[1] This notion is correlated by Holstein with Foucault's approach to systems of thought and to discourses understood as 'broad configurations of meaningful action' (93) that provide the possibilities for self-construction and self-representation.

projections in the complex and dynamic relation between self and other or between individual and community, reflecting the interplay between the political and the psychological. As Roland Walter notices, Toni Morrison develops her character's search for identity, a negotiation of a place within African American culture and within a multi-hyphenated society, through the tension-laden polarization of forces and/or hierarchical structures (North/South, Western/African epistemologies, culture/nature, rational/ mythomagical ethos and worldview, rural/urban etc.) and she pushes these dichotomies to the edge by turning their separating slashes into linking hyphens (210). This "reconciliation" is not always a rule in Toni Morrison's novels, but it is obviously present, which also goes hand in hand with the deconstruction of old traditionally supported hierarchies and binary oppositions. A study of the dismantling of conventionally supported dichotomies throughout her novels implies an exploration of the contexts and the degrees in which polarity turns into hybridity, unity or redefinition of values and the relationship between opposites becomes a dynamic one, even a dialectic process in which tension is a catalyst for a new level of significance, a new sense of self, or for different social and cultural values.

In this paper I argue that in Toni Morrison's writings humor is rendered as an effect of a propensity towards ambivalence, paradox and tension of opposites that can be regarded not only as an essential part of her poetics, but also as a characteristic of African American culture in general. Starting from what I consider the most significant instances that exploit paradox in her novels through a blend of comic and tragic and employment of humor, the paper will analyze the most important rhetoric and stylistic means as well as the underlying psychological factors through which African American experience, irrevocably tragically flavored, could be transfigured through a "humorous twist."

Toni Morrison's rendering of humor as a means of perspective shift and of empowerment can be situated in the broader cultural context minutely analyzed by Henry Louis Gates in which the rhetorical games of the Signifying Monkey, rooted in African American's need for a parallel (or, to use Gates's terminology, "perpendicular")[2] discursive universe, were shaped

[2] Considering them part of a meta-discourse that through vernacular functioned as cultural ritual for African Americans, Henry Louis Gates believes the linguistic games of the Signifying Monkey to be a transformation of the process of signification (based on semantic relations) through a "black difference"

on an axis of signification that constantly referred to the language used and institutionalized by whites trough parody or other forms of intertextuality (xxi). As far as Toni Morrison's use of humor is concerned, critics such as Barbara Christian, Roberta Rubenstein, Donald Gibson or Michael Awkward have referred to the significance of irony in names (which thus function as revealing comments on the characters), pointing out the way in which bitter humor can add new meaning to a figure otherwise dry, bland or involved in serious or tragic situations.[3] At the same time, as Roberta Rubenstein observes, names are sometimes important as emblems of the black community's resistance to white culture's negotiation of its world (150).[4] Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, in their analysis of Toni Morrison's referral to and transformation of elements of white tradition, also mention her use of parody.[5]Other critics such as Patrick Bjork, Houston A. Baker, Eva Boesenberg or Jill Matus have written about Toni Morrison's rendering use of humor as a ritual for survival (Baker 238), referring mostly to famous instances such as the genesis of Bottom (from a joke) in the novel *Sula* or to Shadrack's celebration of National Suicide Day, a form of madness within boundaries (Boesenberg 118) that will also be discussed in my paper. However what I focus on is humor made of the fiber of paradox in Toni Morrison's novels and the underlying tension of reference frames or feelings, emphasizing the way in which it can add a new dimension to incidents or situations that naturally fall in the realm of the tragic, a perspective twist that

---

(46). The black vernacular tradition is based on rhetoric games and represents a "doubling" of the conventional/standard language used and imposed by whites, functioning as a simultaneous, but negated parallel discursive (ontological, political) universe that existed within the larger white discursive universe (49); it makes use of aggressive wit, humor and puns and draws on figurative substitutions, in a language in which "signification" (depending on order and coherence) is replaced by Signification - which luxuriates in the free play of associative rhetorical and semantic relations, relying on the paradigmatic chain or, in Lacan's terms, on chaos and representation of "the Other of discourse" (50).

[3] Some telling examples in this respect are Pilate Dead, whose name, picked up by her father from the Bible, could not be less unfit, given her wise, loving and sacrificing personality, while the surname intensifies the irony, since the woman has access to a world of meaning unknown to others and "without even leaving the ground, she could fly" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 336), as well as the Breedlove family in *The Bluest Eye* in which hardly is there any love "bred," as Pecola is despised and maltreated by her mother for her very 'blackness' and raped by her father.

[4] Rubenstein refers primarily to Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital in *Song of Solomon* – names that, in her view, are "forms of counternegation of the white world that delimits the black one" (150).

[5] For instance, in *Tar Baby* Son becomes a parodic Black Messiah (Harding and Martin 133) who gets to the house of Valerian Street on Christmas, instead of Michael Street, his son, who was expected and for whom all kinds of preparations are made, but who is only present in memories and stories that run in his family.

transfigures the initial "material" while making it more intricate and richer in meaning through the very ambivalence thus reached.

A means by which African Americans faced the implications of slavery was a rich tradition of humor that, instead of diminishing the perniciousness of racism, highlights it (Carpio 5). Thus laughter becomes for African Americans a counterpoint of their traumatic experiences, as in a melody that reflects a tendency to both conceal and fight domination and tragedy. This is precisely what Ralph Ellison refers to in his essay *An Extravagance of Laughter*, where he underlines several particularities of "Negro laughter":

> Whites both hostile and friendly were part of my college scene and thus a good part of my extracurricular education consisted in learning to live with them while retaining my self-esteem. Negro folklore taught the preservation of one's humanity by masking one's motives and emotions, just as it prepared one to be unsurprised at anything that whites might do, because a concern with race could negate all human bonds, including those of shared blood and experience. (180)

Toni Morrison illustrates this tendency towards masking emotions and coping with the implications of racism through a representation of the way in which tragic and comic blend in African Americans' way of relating to the world, while laughter is a form of doubling the traumatic by means of setting it in a new perspective, thus twisting both the primary emotion and the images used by whites in their attempt to challenge their collective sense of self. As Glenda Carpio remarks, African American humor began as a wrested freedom, the freedom to laugh at that which was unjust and cruel in order to create distance from what would otherwise obliterate a sense of self and community. (4). A fragment from *Song of Solomon* points up this function of humor in African American culture as well as the paradox it is based on:

> The men began to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd witnessed and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously, about the speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness. (82)

Part of their identity, stories of ordeals and humiliation are not silenced, but integrated in their personal narratives. Not at all accidentally, these take the form of a *litany*, reflecting both the fact that they did not represent sporadic or singular incidents and the attitude of

hoping to escape their traumatic component through verbal reiteration and a lighter perspective. The paradoxical and twisted nature of laughter that I consider to be an underlying principle of humor as rendered in Toni Morrison's fiction (symbolic of a predilection towards ambivalence which is to a significant extent a distinguishing mark of African American culture, more broadly speaking) is suggestively grasped in the image of "turning sicklelike back to themselves" (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 82). Highly self-reflexive, this form of meta-language implies not only the acceptance of pain, but also a liberating and redeeming role of comic distortion, a process that allows African Americans to integrate experience and, at the same time, an unchaining from its more pervasive traumatic aspects. If personal or collective tragedy cannot be eliminated and if oppression cannot be escaped, at least they can be counteracted or integrated in a worldview and attitude that can preserve a sense of self in spite of the ideology and images that whites tried to impose. The image of the sickle in this passage grasps the ambivalent quality of African American humor (suggesting sharpness, potential to hurt, etc.) as well as the transfiguring act implied by a liberating and relieving shift of perspective (and even emotions), as in an act of "bending" of the initial painful and humiliating experience through reiteration through stories.

We can also consider humor to be closely related to the notion of "double-consciousness" that W.E.B. Du Bois considers a matter of collective psychology – a "veiled" perception and understanding of self and otherness experienced by African Americans that derived from being forced to define (and to relate to) themselves through perspectives and discourses of another. In a famous paragraph from *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes the double-vision or "second-sight" that distinguishes African American culture:

> (…) the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in an amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

Du Bois's vision suggests that what is usually considered to be marginality and minority by the culturally, socially and politically dominant, when perceived and understood from the perspective of the non-dominant, is equal to a doubling of consciousness or to a perpetual

tension between different, even opposing views and ideologies. Du Bois underlines a form of doubling of perspective and sets of representations and the resulting ambivalence (in relation to self and other); one of the means through which African Americans managed to "look at themselves through the eyes of another" without losing an "original," not other-dependent (or controlled) sense of identity was humor which provided a language that paralleled and also molded whites' images and discourses in a new frame of reference.

Without erasing stereotypes and ideas produced and promotes within whites' frames and without eliminating the pain implied by slavery, segregation and discrimination, African Americans were able to maintain their vision of themselves and of their experiences through a transfiguration or a form of doubling of images, attitudes, emotions or expression. Through laughter painful experience or antagonism are not repressed, but assumed, given the more general role of humor as an affect releaser, in Freudian terms, namely an expression of socially unacceptable sexual and aggressive impulses (Parkin 39). Neither subservient, nor controlled by rage, pain or hatred, African Americans can find in laughter both a way of challenging white domination and a means of channeling emotions and feelings engendered by their racial experiences into a paradoxical expression that synthesizes tension rather than denying or avoiding it.[6]

Laughter is thus depicted in Toni Morrison's novels both as a way of covering the pain without repressing it or pretending it is not there and as a means of coping with the traumatic experiences of slavery and racism, of treating them in a personal way that is not dependent on whites' acts, but on a much deeper quality of African Americans who can thus deal with it through displacement. The idea that laughter is "more serious, more complicated than tears" (31) expressed in *Jazz* is also supported in the beginning of the novel *Sula*, where laughter is presented as a typical expression of the black community combining metonymy and oxymoron:

> (…) if a valley man happened to have business up those hills (…) he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of

[6] Not surprisingly Freud connects humor with dreams, considering both to be expressions of the unconscious; however while the latter are more obscure and ambiguous, the former doesn't hide or translate messages into a different language, but only gives them a twist.

> "messing around" to the lively notes of a mouth organ. (…) The black people watching her would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy to the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of their hand, somewhere behind the frayed lapels, somewhere in the sinew's curve. He'd have to (…) let the tenor's voice dress him in silk, or touch the hands of the spoon carvers (…) and let the fingers that danced on wood kiss his skin. Otherwise the pain would escape him even though the laughter was part of the pain. (4)

This passage renders explicit what is often only an indirect notion of a "humorous twist" that African Americans give to their ingrained traumatic experiences. As Jill Matus notes, pleasure and pain mingle indistinguishably in their lives (59), which occurs even in an unconscious way – through artistically conveyed emotion. As a psychological manifestation of a strong emotional charge, laughter is described as a metonymic expression of people in the community, standing for the original pain as well as for the effort to transfigure it (together with dance and song) in a creative impulse that sublimates emotions. Thus through the laughter which "was part of the pain" (4) tragic representation of experience intertwines with comic expression and can result in a form of catharsis.

Like a stylistic matrix of their people, the laughter veiling the pain is also a matter of pride and of preserving an identity despite white's dehumanizing treatment, serving as a means of self-reconstruction and a guarantee of independence. Interconnected, paradoxically fused, but also distinct, the two opposites become part of a singular expression, as if arising from one and the same emotion. Thus hyphenated in a paradoxical manifestation, the original pain and a feeling of joy at being able to somewhat overcome it, transform it and survive in spite of it are both expressed through laughter. In his essay on laughter, Ralph Ellison emphasizes the ambivalent nature of African American laughter when confronted with the absurdity and incongruities of racism:

> And hence our horror at the idea of supposedly civilized men destroying – and in the name of their ideal conception of the human – an aspect of their own humanity. Yes, but for the group thus victimized, such sacrifices are the source of emotions that move far beyond the tragic conception of pity and terror and down into the abysmal levels of conflict and folly from which arises our famous American humor. (178)

African American humor is thus connected to a psychological state (and space) that is no longer "contained" and expressed through emotions associated with the tragic alone, but pertains to a deeper level of "folly" which is more complex precisely through the ambivalent

blend of traumatic experience and humor-imbued manifestation. We could also speak of a "comic relief" or, in Freudian terms, of a discharge of energy built up in certain psychic channels (*cathexis*) that cannot be utilized (Goldstein and McGhee 13). Through humor, the significance of an event that would otherwise cause suffering is reduced, while laughter provides a release through transfiguration of the accumulated (negative) energy, implying "the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure-principle, which is strong enough to assert itself here in the face of the adverse real circumstances" (Freud qtd in ibid. 13).

The novel *Sula* not only refers to the psychological background of humorous manifestation, but also offers several instances that evoke the Signifyin(g) tradition, namely the specific kind of "joking" that African Americans engaged in, which exhibits a love for contradiction, parody, irony and play of perspectives. Laughter, nuanced and complex, is connected with a typical mode of representation alluded to through the "nigger joke" that leads to the birth of the community up in the hills on sterile and hard land, but in a place called nevertheless the Bottom which is itself, as Patrick Bjork observes, a world of contradiction and inverted truth (56). The polysemy and ambivalence of the joke are not accidental. On the one hand, it is a "nigger joke" told by a white for fun or on account of a feeling of entitlement and superiority, engendering a type of derisive laughter which punishes and victimizes (Parkin 15) and functions as a social mechanism of control, implying a comparison between self and other[7]. On the other hand, it's a "nigger joke" performed by an African American starting from images and stereotypes shaped by whites, but, as most comic tradition in African American communities, allowing for being outwardly subservient while communicating visions of revenge and reversal of authority (Walker 34). Both whites and blacks resort to jokes as a means of control or of self-empowerment, making use of a common set of images and stereotypes, since humor is directly tied to the "cultural code" of a given country, to the assumptions people make about time and space, to the values they hold, to their historical experience, etc. (Boskin 28). However, while for whites humor oriented towards or related to blacks is just another means of humiliation and assertion of supposed superiority, for African Americans it functions as a reaction to white domination and degrading

[7] Although not corrective or critical, this type of laughter still implies a mechanical aspect of people who thus regarded as "things" in the Bergsonian sense. Objectifying them, it also diminishes their worth and is designed as a mechanism of control.

stereotyping, performing either an act of resistance through regarding a situation from a different perspective, or a stereotype twist and (at least) an attempt at reversal of power relations. More often than not, African American humor is rather accepting or at least reflective of white stereotypes (Apte), being oriented towards outsmarting or subtle ridicule (Boskin). In Toni Morrison's famous fragment from the novel *Sula* the black lets himself deceived by the white farmer's offer, already full of irony, attracted to the possibility of a richer, more promising life from a different perspective (even from what in the eyes of common people appears as a "divine meta-perspective") as well as to the idea of looking down on white people from the hills, which hints to a sort of double joke:[8]

> A joke. A nigger joke. (..) The kind white folks tell when the mill closes down and they're looking for a little comfort somewhere. The kind colored folks tell on themselves when the rain doesn't come, or comes for weeks, and they're looking for a little comfort somehow. (..) A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. (..) Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn't want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile.". "But it's high up in the hills," said the slave. "High up from us", said the master, "but when God looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven – best land there is." So the slave pressed his master to try to get him some. (…) Which accounted for the fact that white people lived in the rich valley floor in that little river town in Ohio, and the blacks populated the hills above it, taking small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks. (Morrison, *Sula* 4-5)

As Eva Boesenberg remarks, laughing to keep from crying lies at the heart of the blues and of African American vernacular tradition. This passage is endowed with humor coming from several sources simultaneously, richly stratified: on one hand, it is a meta-discourse on humor and jokes in African American communities; on the other hand, it refers to the absurd and bitter irony that led to the genesis of Bottom in a tone and through a narrative voice that seems to subdue the fact that "the joke" was actually a form of betrayal, while also leaving the possibility of multiple readings – while the joke might signify to white people (Boesenberg 157), alluding to the naivety of African Americans, its meaning centers on the

[8] Irony itself implies a process of doubling, since its essence lies in saying the opposite of what one intends to convey to the other person, but in sparing him the contradiction by making them understand that one means the opposite of what one says (Freud qtd. in Stringfellow 1).

economic conditions in the Bottom and the idea of "a good white farmer" resonates ominously to African American audience (Boesenberg 157).

Through the "nigger joke" the whites find a means of comfort *somewhere* (using "colored folks" as the object of joking), while African Americans find comfort *somehow*, a distinction which alludes to their turning towards their own lives, not other people, and trying to give them a humorous twist.[9] The novel *Sula* also illustrates how a simple shift of perspective can release from coercion or attempt at enslavement, since, as Sula's attitude and joking suggest, African Americans are free to get out of a defeatist mindset and to notice how important they are after all and how much attention they get from white people. Laughter is thus healthy, comforting, liberating and elevating as it creates the impression of easiness (Parkin 79). Sula's personal humor is provocative, natural and idiosyncratic[10], but it reflects the "tradition' of distorting and reversing whites" stereotypes that Joseph Boskin refers to: "a particular style of resistance humor that entwined defiance, cunning, inventiveness, and retaliation" (147).[11] Alluding to an inversion of the superior/inferior roles present in many jokes of African Americans (Boskin 151), Sula's humor starts from white's images and myths related to blacks and regards them from a different perspective, which allows for the "comic release" of laughing at one's pain that permeates the whole African American culture:

> I mean I don't know what the fuss is about. (..) White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is to cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? (..) They think rape soon they see you, and if they don't

[9] Obviously they are two different kinds of laughter, as those described by Ralph Ellison when, after he confessed a moment of embarrassment ("And was my face red"), the remark of a white acquaintance is "What do you mean by «red» (…) what you really mean is «ashes of roses»!" Ellison's own comment is also relevant as far as this difference is concerned: "I joined in his laughter. But while he laughed in bright major chords I responded darkly in minor-sevenths and flatted-fifths, and I doubted that he was attuned to the deeper source of our inharmonic harmony" (161).

[10] The main character of the novel *Sula* is depicted as an unconventional African American woman leading a life of adventure and experiment totally independent of social norms and even conflicting with the values of her community, the people of Medallion. Sula is remarkable through her freedom of thought, defining herself only as her individuality dictates (even when that means contradicting conventional notions of morality, friendship or family "loyalty"). Nevertheless when it comes to her witty and humorous interpretation of white people's behavior and stereotypes, she is represented as a perfect example of an African American engaged in Signifying, performing the typical discourse of resistance which ridicules and challenges images, ideas and narratives supported by white people.

[11] Stories, anecdotes, jokes and pranks record black counteraction to oppression and also provide insight into the character of the oppression itself (Boskin 147).

> get the rape they're looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. (103)

This kind of humor also shifts the focus of ridicule in a rather common story-pattern. From this perspective the whites are the dominated ones, controlled by their own fears and desires and chasing the same black men they claim inferior. Besides, regardless of the character's individuality, it reflects the "inwardly masochistic, indeed tragic, externally aggressive, even acrimonious" (Walker 214) quality of African American humor.[12]

In a similar vein, humor is rendered in Toni Morrison's novels as a way of diminishing the tension of trauma or oppression, a form of comic catharsis (Holland) and a process that is both releasing and producing tension (Goldstein and McGhee 21), allowing for a discharge of energy or for the expression of repressed or forbidden (aggressive) impulses and, at the same time, creating a tension of opposites through the comic perspective. For African Americans humor implies freedom of thought and interpretation even when dominant ideologies and discourses aim at different representations and definitions of self and other. In laughter the emotional and the intellectual converge, while forms of incongruity and paradox are welcome and exploited. In Toni Morrison's novels "the comic twist" is represented as form of empowerment and healing, even when it has to do with self-deprecation, irony or just absurd jokes.

Only rarely can one find pure comedy in her novels, as humor is usually either part of a double discourse in which traumatic experiences are "confronted" through a game of perspective, or a means of emphasizing a tragically flavored situation rooted in the historical setting shaped by slavery and racism by means of putting it in a broader, more nuanced context. Through a counterpoint technique, a traumatic incident is sometimes echoed and doubled by a less significant and rather comical one, as in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola's abuse by her father is indirectly anticipated by the comic scene of her "ministrating" (as the other girls distort what was happening to her). In that sequence humor is not actually intertwined with painful experience, but employed in a form of parallelism so as to create a strong contrast or a background for the following tragic incident. The doubling in this case is

[12] Nancy Walker lists gallows humor, the ironic curse, double meanings, trickster tales and retaliatory jokes among the fundamental expressions of African American humor.

not a matter of collective psychology, but a game of construction, a process in the poetics of the novel, since the childlike attitudes (and even unintentional language games), the clumsy and funny attempts of Claudia and Frieda at solving the minor problem, exaggerated in the girls' eyes, of Pecola's "ministrating"[13] and thus being ready to have babies are sharply juxtaposed to the subsequent experience of her being raped by her father that disrupts the girl's childhood and in itself allows for no "humorous relief". As a form of tragic irony or irony of fate (Muecke 1), the humorous and the painful are still blended through the inevitable connection between the two incidents in the novel, while the sense of incongruity (between two stages or situations, between expectations and outcome, normality and absurd, etc.) is preserved. After Pecola is represented as a girl ready to have children if somebody loves her, in the end of the novel all that is left is the haunting image of her isolation and insanity after an experience of brutality and the death of her baby.

Even the sarcastic perspective on middle-class and bourgeois African Americans labeled as "colored people" in Toni Morrison's novels conceals serious and sharp notes, echoing a caustic quality of traditional African American humor directed towards whites and towards those within their own ethnic group who, in the view of the others, deny their identity and heritage (Apte 126). These bourgeois African Americans are intensely ridiculed for trying to imitate the habits and mannerisms of whites to such an extent that they almost "shed" an "original" personality they could have enjoyed on account of social position and myths. They are described as leading an artificial life in which they identify too much with their class and money, getting very far from what is regarded as a typical African American "spirit" characterized by wildness, passion and eroticism unbridled by norms, after having learned how to get rid of 'the funkiness':[14]

---

[13]While the bleeding that terrified Claudia and Frieda does not lead to her death or "ruin," as the girls feared it would when trying to help her, save her, but also hide her, Pecola's rape by her father, together with her being pregnant with his baby, is actually devastating and depicted in a sequence and from a perspective in which humor has no longer a place.

[14]While Geraldine is portrayed as a prototype (as well as a result) of the class she belongs to, her son seems to be attracted by the "wildness" and even "rawness" that the children from poor families display, although his mother forbids him to play with them, an ironic contrast through which Toni Morrison highlights the 'learned' quality of what is being held as standard or ideal on account of class distinctions. Besides actual education and norms of "refinement" and "civilization," *colored people* also learn how to differentiate themselves from the others, the *niggers*: "They go to land-grand colleges, normal schools,

> Nor do they know that she will give him her body sparingly and partially. He must enter her surreptitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel. (…) While he moves inside her, she will wonder why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place – like an armpit, for example, or the palm of the hand. Someplace one could get to easily, and quickly, without undressing. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 69)

In *The Bluest Eye*, the object of irony is Geraldine, a middle-class colored woman whose home reflects the dryness and frigidity of her (socially constructed and controlled) personality, but whose family is contrasted to the low-class Breed loves. The same habits and distance from "naturalness" and real life are mocked in *Sula* through the image of Nel's mother and the polarity between her neat and ordered home and the nonchalant norm-free lifestyle and house of Eva and Hannah Peace. Similarly, richer African Americans emulating white mannerism are ridiculed in *Song of Solomon*, through minute depictions of the intimate life of Milkman's parents – during the years they were close, sex between Macom Dead and his wife Ruth meant rather him meticulously untying her corset than anything else, which explains why later he only missed the underwear, but never her body.

All forms of humor imply a parallelism, a game of doubling, while contradictions are inevitable and even necessary in jokes (Schaeffer). Based on a conjunction of contraries, irony can be considered a balancing of serious and comic or fanciful and prosaic, as a recognition of the fact that "the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality" (Schlegel qtd in Muecke 18), also demanding an opposition or incongruity of appearance and reality even in its most simple verbal or situational kinds. At the same time, the doubling is related to the "inner and peculiarly essential process of humor which is one that inevitably dismantles, splits and

---

and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children into obedience; (...). Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, the find it and fight it until it dies (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 68).

disrupts" (Pirandello 31), implying a "feeling of the opposite", an underlying contrast between an expected, desired or ideal situation and a real one.[15]

In Toni Morrison's novels tragic irony or black humor impregnate even extreme situations "of life and death," evoking the so-called "gallows humor," in which the macabre must be assimilated in order to be partly controlled by means of "the laughter of resistance" (Boskin 152).[16] Freud calls it "the triumph of narcissism", because it asserts the "ego's invulnerability in the face of death" (Freud qtd. in Carpio 6). Sixo's singing and laughter in *Beloved* right in front of the white men who catch him and eventually kill him is a concrete representation of defying death and counteracting fear, reflecting a drive towards survival as well as, albeit in a contorted form, a "natural" function of laughter as "a signal of danger past or dismissed" (Updike qtd. in Holland 30); at the same time, it is a sign or proof of being most alive even when confronted with death, in a simple defense impulse, since, as Henri Bergson said, "the comic demands something as a momentary anesthesia of heart" (Bergson qtd. in Holland 31). In a similar vein, but with somewhat different implications, Shadrack's National Suicide Day in the novel *Sula* contains a special kind of humor deriving from his crazy and unusual behavior, but also from people's acceptance of it in their daily lives - National Suicide Day became "part of the fabric of life in the Bottom of Medallion" (16). Created by this luminal character as an antidote to his fear of death, it also provides bitter situational irony rooted in the contrast between his intention of controlling fear and the unexpected through maximizing the presence of the idea of death instead of avoiding it and the collective disaster at the end of the novel which signals precisely the imminence and unpredictability of death. The death of a large number of the people who had joined him in laughter and carnival-like play in his yearly festivity as the tunnel collapses is something Shadrack neither provokes nor avoids, pertaining only to a form of irony of fate.

---

[15] In Pirandello's terms, while in the conception of any work of art reflection is almost a form of feeling, almost a mirror in which the feeling looks at itself (118), in humor there is another type of doubling, since reflection is like a mirror of icy water, in which the flame of feeling not only looks at itself, but also plunges in it and extinguishes itself (118). In humor the images and ideas stirred by an emotion that excites the spirit are not in harmony with that emotion, but only ideas and images conflicting with that emotion are aroused, because reflection is inserted into the seed of emotion like a malignant viscous growth (120).

[16] In African American tradition there are many jokes that imply laughter at both oppression and death, such as the following: Negro (just arriving in town): "Mr Policeman, can you tell me where the Negros hang out in this town?" Policeman: "Yes, do you see that tall tree over there?" (Boskin 153).

In milder situations, when not related to paradoxical expression and tragic-comic ambivalence, laughter and humor are still depicted as a means of empowerment in Toni Morrison's novels, since they function as weapons of disrupting mechanisms of control set by white people, shifting the power balance or simply shaping a form of equality. Some of the most illustrative in this respect are the tensions between Son and Valerian in *Tar Baby* and Jacob Vaark and D'Ortega in *A Mercy*, where traditionally supported dichotomies and hierarchies (related to gender stereotypes, to social class markers or deriving from racialized polarity) are subverted and even inverted, as the expected/usual power relations are broken.

Often a twisted expression, laughter is rendered in Toni Morrison's novels as intertwined with pain, in a process in which humor is a psychological and social manifestation of ambivalence, reflecting a form of complexity, but also one of self-subverting irony characteristic to African Americans. Whether a way of counteracting and shifting habitual and institutionalized perspectives, or a means of derision (even when it has to do with self-deprecation), humor is often intricate and paradoxical, reflecting a typically African American way of relating to the world and of treating a given collective or individual context where pain can no longer be expressed in any way but through laughter.

Works Cited

Apte, Mahadev L. *Laughter and Humor: An Anthropological Approach*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Print.

Baker, Houston A. "When Lindbergh Sleeps with Bessie Smith: The Writing of Place in *Sula*." Gates and Appiah 236-60. Print.

Boesenberg, Eva. *Gender-Voice-Vernacular: The Formation of Female Subjectivity in Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker*. Heidelberg: Winter, 1999. Print.

Boskin, Joseph. *The Humor Prism in 20th Century America*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1997. Print.

Bjork, Patrick Bryce. *The Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Lang, 1992. Print.

Carpio, Glenda R. *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903. London: Paradigm, 2004. Print.

Ellison, Ralph. *Going to the Territory*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986. Print.

Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print.

———, and K.A. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives*. New York: Amistad, 1993. 126-58. Print.

Goldstein, Jefferey H., and Paul E. McGhee. *The Psychology of Humor*. New York: Academic P, 1972. Print.

Harding, Wendy, and Martin, Jacky. *A World of Difference. An Inter-cultural Study of Toni Morrison*. London: Greenwood P, 1994. Print.

Holland, Norman N. *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982. Print.

Holstein, James, and Jaber Gubrium. *The Self We Live By: Narrative Identity in a Postmodern World*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Lang, Candace D. *Irony/Humor*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1988. Print.

Matus, Jill. *Toni Morrison.* New York: Manchester UP*,* 1998*.*Print.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Washington Square P, 1970. Print.

———. *Sula*. 1974. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

———. *Song of Solomon*. 1977. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

———. *Tar Baby*. 1981. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

———. *Beloved*. 1987. Penguin Books, 1991. Print.

———. *Jazz*. 1992. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

———. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage International, 2009. Print.

Muecke, D. C. *Irony*. London: Methuen, 1970. Print.

Parkin, John. *Humor Theorists of the Twentieth Century*. New York: Mellen Press, 1997. Print.

Pirandello, Luigi. *On Humor*. Chapel Hill, N.C: U of North Carolina P, 1960. Print.

Rice, Robert William. *Toni Morrison and the American Tradition*. New York: Peter Lang, 1996. Print.

Rubenstein, Roberta. “Pariahs and Community.” Gates and Appiah 126-58. Print.

Schaeffer, Neil. *The Art of Laughter*. Columbia UP, 1981. Print.

Stringfellow, Frank Jr. *The Meaning of Irony: A Psychoanalytic Investigation*. New York: State U of New York P, 1994. Print.

Walker, Nancy A. *What’s so Funny? Humor in American Culture*. Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1998. Print.

Walter, Roland. *Narrative Identities: (Inter) Cultural In-Betweeness in the Americas*. Bern: Lang, 2003. Print.