

Men's power and the rhetoric of black women's Visibility in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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Introduction

In their everyday lives, the women in Toni Morrison's fiction expose the reality of a situation whereby the discrepancy between what men think of themselves and what women perceive them as, highlights the power that men have and what use they put it to. As far as the representation of black men goes, the originality of *Tar Baby* (1981) in the work of its author lies in the contrast between Son the man, and Jade the woman he is made to team up with. The plot brings together a black man with very little formal education and a highly ambitious professional black woman. No wonder it appears to Darwin T. Turner (1984) that "when one compares *Tar Baby* with Morrison's earlier works, Jadine and Son seem too ordinary,

too stereotypical – created solely to demonstrate the clash of class and culture". The novel records the implications of Son's goal in life and how this goal affects psychologically his relationships with people around him. Throughout it, material possessions are processed into a source of power for whoever owns them.

This study purports to show on the one hand that the ability to control and silence others, in the context of *Tar Baby*, is associated with men in general and the white man in particular. And on the other hand it means to establish that since every powerful man has his social position enhanced by a woman who depends on him for her self-fulfilment, a man who fails to make it becomes an oddity and a source of embarrassment for the woman in his life, especially if the latter happens to be career-oriented.

T*ar Baby* is set on a small Caribbean island called l'Arbre de la Croix where Valerian Street, a retired white industrialist, turns their summer residence into a definitive home against the will of his wife Margaret. They share their home with their two black servants, Ondine and Sidney Childs, who have been married for several decades but have no children. Valerian sponsored the education of Ondine's niece, Jadine (Jade in short), both in America and in France, where she studied art and modeling.

When food starts disappearing from the basement, the butler Sidney first blames it all on rats. One night, though, Margaret, who hardly gets along with her husband, retires to her room only to find a black man with dreadlocked hair sitting in her closet. "She stood in the doorway screaming, first at Valerian and then at Jadine, who rushed to her side" (p.78).

Before allowing Son into the picture, the author makes sure that Margaret is perceived by the reader as a frail person incapable of defending herself. Her helplessness is further stressed as "She (...) balled her beautiful hands into fists and pummeled her own temples, screaming louder" (p.78). This white woman who is a romantic combination of frailty and beauty proves unable to name what she just discovered in her closet, and when she eventually manages to whisper "Black" - with "her eyes shut tight" (p.79) - nobody understands her. Many a woman, under similar circumstances, would have said

"A man" or "A black man". When scrutinized against the background of the dramatic irony exhibited by the omniscient narrator in the presentation of the conversation (p.78-9), Margaret's choice of word reads like an affirmation of her whiteness - a whiteness she feels is threatened.

Surprisingly enough, while Margaret is struggling to recover from the shock, Valerian makes sure that the intruder is treated as a member of the household. As a matter of fact Valerian's reception of Son takes everybody by surprise: "Good evening, sir. Would you care for a drink ?" Apparently Toni Morrison is about creating a very liberal white man. By having this unexpected reaction, Valerian expresses the type of attitude he would like to have toward the intruder. Margaret's fear, in the author's description, is counterbalanced by her husband's self-confidence. By allowing the stranger to stay in the house Valerian has created the necessary space where important actions are to take place in the future. For one thing, the coming together of the black man and Jadine is made easier thanks to the landlord's move. It takes the newcomer long to reveal his identity : at first all we know is that he calls himself Son, is originally from the West Indies, and lived in the United States for many years.

In terms of the representation of males, *Tar Baby*, more than any other previous novel of Toni Morrison is fraught with plurifaceted characters whose various images are the constructs

of the consciousnesses around them. Soon after, Son is discovered in the house and is asked to stay - to be consequently waited upon by a reluctant Sidney - the latter overhears a conversation between his wife and the stranger in the kitchen. He steps in and the long argument that takes place between the two men is most revealing:

"What are you doing in my place?" Ondine held up a hand. "He came to apologize, Sidney." Son moved aside so he would not be standing between them and said, "yes, Sir..." "Anything you got to say to me or to my wife, you say it somewhere else. You are not invited in here". "It was Jadine", Son began. "She suggested ..." "Jadine can't invite you in here, only I can do that. And let me tell you something now. If this was my house, you would have a bullet in your head. Right there". And he pointed to a spot between Son's eyebrows. "You can tell it's not my house because you are still standing upright. But this here is". He pointed a finger at the floor. "Mr Childs, you have to understand me. I was surprised as anybody when he asked me to stay -" Sidney interrupted him again. "You have been lurking around here for days, and a suit and a haircut don't change that". "I'am not trying to change it. I'm trying to explain it. I was in some trouble and I left my ship. I couldn't just knock on the door". "Don't hand me that mess. Save it for people who don't know better. You know what I'm talking about, you was upstairs!" "I was wrong, okay ? I'm guilty of being hungry and I'm guilty of being stupid, but nothing else. He knows that. Your boss knows that, why don't you know it ?" "Because you are not stupid and Mr Street don't know nothing about you. White folks play with Negroes. It entertained him, that's all, inviting you to dinner. He don't give a damn what it does to anybody else. You think he cares about his wife ? That you scared his wife ? If it entertained him, he'd hand her to you !" "Sidney!" Ondine was frowning. "It's true!" (Sidney insists) "You know him all this time and you think that ?" She asked him. "You tell me", he answered. "You ever see him worry over her?" Ondine did not answer. "No. You don't. And he don't worry over us neither. What he wants is for people to do what he says do. Well, it may be his house but I live here too and I don't want you around!" Sidney turned back to Son, pointing at him again. "Mr Childs", Son spoke softly but clearly, "you don't have to be worried over me either". "But I am. You the kind of man that does worry me. You had a job, you chucked it. You got in some trouble, you say, so you just run off. You hide, you live in secret, underground, surface when you caught. I know you, but you don't know me. I am a Philadelphia Negro mentioned in the book of the very same name. My people owned drugstores and taught school while yours were still cutting their faces open so as to tell one of you from the other. And if you looking to live off the fat of the land, and if you think I'm going to wait on you, think twice! He'll lose interest in you faster than you can blink. You already got about all you can out of this place: a suit and some new shoes. Don't get another idea in your head". "I'm leaving, Mr Childs. He said he'll help me get a visa - something - so I can get back

home. So..." You don't need no visa to go home. You a citizen, ain't you?" "Well, I use another name. I mean I don't want nobody checking me out". "Take my advice. Clean your life up" (p. 162-3).

This passage dramatizes three male images. However the authoritarian Sidney Childs, who is seeking to take over from his employer Valerian Street in order to deal with Son properly, occupies a strategic position in the narrator's technique of exposition. The author establishes the character's authority by emphasizing two facts. He is black and he has been working for - and living with - a white man for quite a long time. He therefore feels qualified to articulate what Valerian and Son are about. Even Ondine is not allowed to question her husband's claim. The irony of the situation is that the part of the house he wants to keep Son away from, is the kitchen. Hunger forced Son into the house. So, he needs the kitchen, if only metaphorically Sidney's intention to symbolically starve the stranger finds expression in his threat to Son's life. Because Sidney regards himself as an authority on both Blacks and Whites he needs no explanation from a fellow Black to understand the latter's motives. The colourful language in which the author has him dismiss Son's own reasons for being in the house both underlines Sidney's self-proclaimed position as the ultimate custodian of the truth and obliquely conveys Valerian's ignorance about Blacks. As the conversation moves on, Morrison creates two contradictory images of Valerian, with each of the two black men trying to promote one.

Evidently, Son is judging Valerian as an individual and on the basis of a specific, punctual decision about him, whereas Sidney sees his boss just as the representative of a whole race. "White folks play with Negroes", he says. The other irony is that the more Son tells Sidney about himself, the more convinced Sidney is of knowing the intruder's nature. Sidney, in the narrator's view, regards himself as an expert on human nature. He can read people's souls and tell whatever they are about, although he remains a secret to them: "I know you but you don't know me". And he holds both the power and the authority that legitimate his knowledge as a birthright. He is a *Philadelphia Negro*, i.e. one of the "emancipated" career-oriented Blacks whose "case" was studied by W.E.B. DuBois in his famous book *The Philadelphia Negro*. Being from that class alone - as Toni Morrison ironically has the character believe - is a sign of cleverness and, as a result, no explanation from Son can ever convince him of the good faith of the stranger.

As a matter of fact, one may understandably imagine that after drilling certain ideas into his boss about Blacks, Sidney is afraid that Son might promote another "black" image that could affect Sidney's life around Valerian. From Son's perspective, Valerian Street is caring and understanding, and the record of his actions suggests on his behalf a fairly liberal stand on racial issues. But as a Philadelphia Negro who knows better, Sidney thinks that on account of Valerian's race the latter belongs to a fixed category of people. Once the basic idea is posited that Whites play with Blacks, the butler's next move is to account for his boss's current difference as far as treating a stranger as a human being is concerned. It may be true that Valerian derives plea-

sure from inviting Son to dinner but his character as seen by Sidney consistently appears sustained by a self-centeredness that affects even Valerian's married life. He cares about nobody but himself. Ondine's "You know him all this time and you think that?" raises a lot of questions about the accuracy of her husband's view of Valerian. She uses the observation to set the record straight. Her contribution consequently underlines the importance of a feminine input whose function in the definition of the "object" under depiction consists not only in balancing out a masculine position but most of all in humanizing the image eventually obtained. It is this humanized image of Valerian in his relationship with Blacks that prevails until he decides to fire Gideon, the yardman.

The meaning of Valerian Street in *Tar Baby* is crucial to the understanding of most of the other characters in the novel. He owns a mansion and employs many people. Those are well-known symbols of wealth, and in Morrison's fiction wealth has always been depicted as a metaphor for power: Valerian is an achiever who, by virtue of what he owns, has a lot of power at his disposal. In a totally different context a critic made the point that "... power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments" (Sibley : 1995; p. ix). This observation applies all the more to Son and Valerian as the latter feels free to welcome whomever he wants in his house. In other words, as a wealthy man, he has the power to control, dictate and manipulate. Ironically enough, he is not often allowed by the author to use that power. Valerian's authority is very often undermined, if not openly questioned, by his employees. To some extent, the first time he actually uses his power is when he fires Gideson and, unsurprisingly, his decision sparks off only hostility around him. Gidson's dismissal is a turning point in the depiction of Valerian's character. By having the yardman fired by his boss for stealing a few apples, the author creates a circumstance that forces Son - among other characters - to reassess his perception of his benefactor. That a man of Valerian's wealth could take such an action against a poor worker is beyond Son's understanding.

The representation of this rich, liberal White is the first full length portrayal of a white male by Toni Morrison. The techniques used by the author to depict him include both letting the character's actions speak for themselves and allowing, at the same time, Blacks from his entourage to generate a discourse that aims to underline the impact of white presence on their everyday lives. In *Tar Baby*, there is an overt sense of commitment to re-evaluating old, received ideas in light of new experiences. In this respect, one can see many striking similarities between the ways both Valerian and Son are represented.

Son is said to be "a man without human rites..." and what follows is an incomplete list of those deficiencies: unbaptized, uncircumcised, unmarried, undivorced, propertyless, homeless, etc. Once again, the black man in Morrison's fiction is posited in terms of what he is not or what he lacks. Now those rites are extremely important in the sense that they alone can provide any individual with the appropriate psycholi-

gical strength that it takes to feel a regular member of any community of human beings. A human being without any rites is, in actual fact, entitled to no rights, and Son confirms this by joining, for the first eight years of his life in America, "that great underclass of undocumented men". Throughout his early American years, Son is depicted as a non-entity. Oddly enough, his realization of his "ritelessness" does not lead him to facing his helplessness. He does not surrender to the fact that he is excluded from the society; instead, the author makes him creatively transform what should be regarded as a handicap into a source of power that can sustain him in the expression of his difference. In his opinion, something is wrong with rites. And he has always wanted "another way". Such a choice clearly conflicts with many previous representations of black men, especially in the fiction of black male writers. In Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James Baldwin and many others, black men overtly wish to experience the "human rites" in order to qualify to fit into American society. These writers seem to take it to mean that "rites" are what the American literary critic Sacvan Bercovitch refers to as "the forms and strategies of cultural continuity" (1993 : p. 30). In his confrontation with Jadine - a woman who most clearly believes in rites - Son is, at first, perceived as a lazy element. The fact of the matter is that as the pieces of the puzzle of his life progressively fall into place, he appears as someone who does believe in rites as long as they can serve his immediate purposes. He marries, in his own words, "that crazy nurse woman" (p. 156) because he needs an American passport ; he learns to read and write but refuses to inform his employers about his educational skills for fear that they might give him too much responsibility on the job.

During his argument with Jadine - or rather their long discussion (p.113-24) that eventually degenerates into a hot argument - different facets of the character are exposed by the author thanks to the scrutiny of his interlocutor. What soon appears to be a salient aspect of his personality is a categorical rejection of material wealth and the paths that lead to it. As a result, Jade appears as the living symbol of what he must keep away from. But behind her formal education, her travels abroad, her expensive clothes and her perspectives on life, what Son sees is the haunting soul of Valerian. The narrator's view is that he has held Jade hostage all her life by providing the conditions that made her what she now is. Son's psychological confusion, at this stage, is sustained by his attraction to a black woman whose values, he seems to imagine, are actually opposed to his. He first manages to take an excited interest in her career as a model in Paris because this strategy seems to be the best one if he is to know more about Jadine.

When the author eventually decides to have Son's "real" self emerge as Jade imagines it, at first it shows itself in his repeated use of a certain four-letter word. His consistent use of this language - a semantically charged representation of what he thinks about her - provokes revulsion in her later on when he decides to talk to her in a more direct way. The Sorbonne graduate quickly notices the difference in their backgrounds and the response she receives ("Goddam") to her question "Don't you have any other word to express awe?" (p.117) confirms her fear. As Toni Morrison herself reminds us : "Cultures,

whether silenced or monologic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them" (in Lashgari : 1995, p.4).

What Jade does not realise, though, is how disconnected Son feels from her and whatever she stands for. This gap is progressively bridged. The first stage is Son's insinuation that for Jade to be so successful a model in Europe, she has to have been a prostitute in the Old World :

Jadine jumped away from the desk and leaned forward trying to kill him with her fists while her mind raced to places in the room where there might be a poker or a vase or a sharp pair of shears.

He turned his head a little but did not raise his arms to protect himself. All he had to do was what he did: stand up and let his height put his face and head out of her easy reach. She stretched nonetheless trying to tear the whites from his eyes. He caught both her wrists and crossed them in front of her face. She spit full in his face but the saliva fell on the C of his pajama top. Her gold-thread slippers were no good for kicking- but she kicked anyhow. He uncrossed her wrists and swung her around, holding her from behind in the vise of his arms. His chin was in her hair (p. 120-1).

This image of the black man who stands tall and cool in front - metaphorically - of the threat represented by the black woman is even taken one step further. Son does not strike back. Instead, the final scene of the segment ("His chin was in her hair") suggests a romantic involvement initiated by the man. By meeting female adversity with male love the author presents Son not as an enemy any more but rather as a potential friend and/or a protector of Jade.

The new situation generates only frustration in Jadine because the fight she has just started is actually meant to provide the appropriate outlet to her anger. No wonder that she misreads Son's loving gesture. "You rape me and they will feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger"(p.121). Whatever the reason behind this misreading, the message has the merit of bringing up, once again, the worn out stereotypical image of the black man as a rapist. It seems important to note that there exists an important scholarship by an increasing number of black women which tends to insist that rape and sexual denigration become an issue only if the victim is white (Hooks : 1981; Harris : 1984; Giddings : 1984; Jarret-Macauley : 1996; Mullings: 1997). Read against such a background, Son's response "Why you little white girls always think somebody's trying to rape you?" (p.121) is more than ironical. By assuming in his question that all rapists are black and that all rape victims are white the author clearly questions Jade's "blackness" and puts Son in the position of an arrogant man who thinks he knows what it takes to be a black woman. For some time now, black women have been consistently denying black men the right to define black womanhood.

The way they see it, for a black man to claim that he can tell a black woman what she is or ought to be instead of just contributing a male input toward black women's self definition is to treat black women like immature children. However, Jade

acts defensive enough for the reader to assume that she doubts her own blackness. As Tudier Harris puts it: "Through education, severing of connection to black people, and general disposition, Jadine is "white". She has traded a cultural heritage for what she considers the finer things of life..." (1984 : p. 153). The second stage of Jadine's anger as imagined by the author is therefore provoked by what she regards as Son's insult.

Despite this aggressiveness openly expressed by both parties, Son and Jade are pulled together by external forces. It is a fact that Son's coming to L'Arbre de la Croix caused Valerian's household to split into many factions. Only Valerian himself "liked" the intruder right from the beginning. And yet, as time passes by, Jade becomes sensitive to what Son is perceived as. When Margaret at the very beginning dare not call him "nigger", evidently because she thinks Jade might take offence at the word, the latter swiftly makes her white friend feel comfortable calling a spade a spade. Later on, though, when Margaret says Son looks like a gorilla, a sudden change occurs in the black woman: "Jadine's neck prickled at the description. She had volunteered nigger - but not gorilla"(p. 129). Toni Morrison is putting Margaret in the category of Whites who see Blacks as animals. To their conception Morrison opposes Jade's outlook. From the foregoing example and many more, one may conclude that throughout *Tar Baby* the character Son - or more precisely the representation of it - functions as a literary device used by the author to hold the various episodes of the story together. His very presence in the house has generated between the members of the household a dialectic that has left himself unchanged. In the description of Son's psychological condition from the moment he jumps ship to when he gets caught in Margaret's room, a recurrent motif is his preoccupation with everything but women. Over and over again, the point is made that "He had not followed the women". But after sleeping for a few nights in Margaret's room a change starts taking place in him.

The beginning of Son's romantic involvement with Jadine offers the author another opportunity to elaborate more on Son's personal beliefs and attitudes which are clearly articulated in his life story. The narration is basically made by the character himself and Jadine's contribution consists of questions that her interlocutor cannot evade. As was suggested earlier on, everyone Son interacts with has his or her own mental representation of him. One consequence, therefore, of Son's "confession" to Jade is that her new image of him is informed by knowledge no other person in Valerian's house has access to. She is closer than anybody else to the center that holds the various images of Son together because she knows the "truth". And the truth is that he is a murderer on the run. He killed by accident his unfaithful girlfriend and her teenage lover. And after narrating such a story, he simply proceeds to tell her "I won't kill you. I love you" (p. 177).

But Morrison makes sure his love has some difficulty growing. The first major crisis takes place when Valerian fires two of

his house-servants – Gideon the gardener and his wife Therese – for stealing his apples. Not only is the news broken while the "family" is having a large Christmas meal but in addition Jadine unexpectedly sides with her old "patron" against the unfortunate two:

Valerian at the head of his Christmas table, looked at the four black people; all but one he knew extremely well, all but one, and even that one was in his debt. Across from him at the bottom of the table sat Son who thought he knew them all very well too, except one and that one was escaping out of his hands, and that one was doing the bidding of her boss and "patron". Keeping the dinner going smoothly, quietly chastising everybody including her own uncle and aunt, soothing Margaret, agreeing with Valerian and calling Gideon Yardman and never taking the trouble to know his name and never calling his own name out loud.

He looked at Valerian and Valerian looked back. The evening eyes met those of the man with the savannas in his face. The man who respected industry looked over a gulf at the man who prized fraternity (p. 204-5).

A similarity is created by the author between Sidney and Valerian. Just as Sidney claims that he knows White folks as well as black people, so is Valerian portrayed as somebody knowledgeable about the people in his house. At the same time, his hospitable treatment of Son, in retrospect, is presented as a callously calculated strategy destined to cripple Son psychologically. Even the locations of Valerian and Son facing each other at the Christmas dinner table convey the sense that Valerian is in the stronger position. By creating a gap between the men on the one hand and on the other hand, by making one cherish industry and the other one fraternity, the author once again creates focused characters and seems to imply that they cannot reach out and touch each other. Their first attempt to do that was, understandably, short-lived. Once the deceiving liberal appearance at first exhibited by Valerian is shattered by his own deeds (seen mostly from Son's perspective), he becomes vulnerable to somebody like Son who has been waiting for the first opportunity to strike. When he does strike, the presentation of the two men's states of mind is made in a more expressive way as soon as they start talking to each other. In fact, when Son does verbally attack his host, the resulting ideological confrontation between the boss and the intruder clearly indicates that they do not belong together.

The expression by Son of his difference triggers off the rest of the action. The situation is very well summed-up during the argument in Valerian's utterance: "*I am being questioned by these people as if I could be called into question!*" (p. 208). The author is having Valerian verbalise what everyone knew all along: he owns everything and provides for everyone in his house. He respects industry and the dominant culture and, thanks to the shift of voice, Morrison insists that he does not think it necessary for him to respect poor people. All things considered Gideon becomes an important part of the narrative only when he is no longer in the picture - physically speaking. And the task of opening people's eyes to the gardener's importance has been assigned to Son. The latter knows for a fact that by Valerian's standards only people who own things

are important and respectable. To reverse the trend, as Son is made to see it, is to define the terms of a new dialogue between the "haves" and the "have-nots". The notion of fraternity which, at first, suggests the coming together of the exploited poor in general quickly fades into something similar to the Black Brotherhood in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Most of the issues he raises force Valerian to make sure that he (Valerian) keeps in control in his own house. The rhetoric they both engage in aims, in the case of Valerian, to maintain unchallenged the power he knows he has whereas in the case of Son it aims to dismantle the very foundation of that power. Viewed against this background, Ondine's rebellion against her employer becomes the artistic expression of Son's influence. He wishes Jadine also were influenced by him. Unfortunately, all he can remember her doing throughout the whole debate is "... watching her pour his wine, listening to her take his part, trying to calm Ondine and Sidney to his satisfaction". All things considered, Jadine to him looks just like a replica of Valerian. But in addition to whatever she has in common with her "patron", she is perceived by the author - at this stage of the story - to be weak and incapable of standing on her own feet. Jade is disconnected from the black community and the little visibility that she can exhibit is sustained by Valerian alone. It therefore makes sense to suggest that "The novel serves to indict a culture and an education" (Hawthorne : 1988, p. 103).

Son has internalised the basic principles of the male culture he was born into and which taught him - among other things - to be protective of women. In a moment of introspection he therefore assesses his duty to Jadine in the light of his interpretation of that culture:

(U)nderneath her efficiency and know-it-all that were wind chimes. Nine rectangles of crystal, rainbowed in the light. Fragile pieces of glass tinkling as long as the breeze was gentle. But in more vigorous weather the thread that held it together would snap.

So it would be his duty to keep the climate mild for her, to hold back with his hand if need be thunder, drought and all manner of winterkill, and he would blow with his lips a gentle enough breeze for her to tinkle in. The bird-like defencelessness he had loved while she slept and saw when she took his hand on the stairs was his to protect.

This rhetoric of female frailty that needs a male presence to lean against does not draw any clear-cut distinctions between the physical, the emotional, and the psychological. It therefore makes too many demands on Son. If he is to guarantee Jade every kind of protection, he has to make sure first of all that he himself is psychologically stable. And he is not. The narrator's evaluation of the internal turmoil experienced by the character is illuminating to that effect:

For if he loved and lost this woman whose sleeping face was the limits his eyes could safely behold and whose wakened face threw him into confusion, he would sure lose the world. So he made himself disgusting to her. Insulted and offended her (p. 220).

The anger which originates from the realisation of the dilemma is not expressed openly. It explains, though, Son's tempo-

rary decision to stop functioning from the heart as far as his relationship with her goes. But he feels incapable of hating her, which is why he tries to have her hate him instead. He prefers to give her "... sufficient cause to help him keep his love in chains..." (p. 220).

Their life as a couple in America is another background against which another dimension of Son's character is portrayed. There is ample evidence in the novel that, in Son's view, to help Jadine is to help her rebel against whatever Valerian stands for. Son's desire to have Jadine unlearn what it took her a whole lifetime to learn proceeds from a philosophy of education that focuses on the cultivation of respect for the individual for what he/she is and not for what he/she owns. His refusal to join the ratrace is referred to by her as "ignorance" (p. 264). Jadine, as is reiterated throughout the novel, has learned "to make it in this world" (p. 264). Her insistence on the importance of the material and Son's point that "I don't want to make it. I want to be it" (p. 266) are unfortunately presented as two strictly defined and unalterable alternatives. The debate between the two lovers sheds some light on the philosophic interpretation of the Afro-American cultural heritage as the Tar Baby story in the novel suggests. From Jadine's perspective, to stick to the black cultural tradition is to "stay in that medieval slave basket..." (p. 271) whereas for Son, joining mainstream American society is a nightmare. Their final break-up initiated by Jade takes place as a result of her inability to change or manipulate Son.

All things considered, Son's divorce from the material did not win him a stable relationship with Jadine because he was not equipped with the appropriate psychological strength that could have enabled him to meet her halfway by accepting that one can strike a balance between making it and being it - whatever "being it" means. In that respect, his final decision to join her in *L'île de la croix* in order to give their love a second chance is simply a belated loss of innocence. By delaying Son's psychological maturation the author has succeeded in making him realise retrospectively that he gave up a woman he loves simply "Because she had a temper, energy, ideas of her own and fought back" (p. 298).

Conclusion

As was earlier on emphasized in this study, money plays an important role in Toni Morrison's fiction. It generates a power that is easily processed into the language spoken by the rich to define what they want and what they think the dispossessed need. Her male characters, when wealthy like Valerian Street, become the centre that holds together the shattered lives

of many others and the respect that comes with their very existence is perceived by them as their ultimate objective in life. At the same time, though, the quest - among Blacks - for material wealth invariably takes place in the context of cultural dispossession. This "fact" probably accounts for Son's commitment to "being" it as opposed to "making" it. In one way or another, Son is depicted as going through a painful process of culture change. Ironically enough, the author consistently defines him in terms of what he does not know, or cannot do, what he is not or may not offer. He is therefore confronted with the dominant culture as a potential loser. By contrast, Jade like many of Morrison's black women is defined in terms of what she can do or produce. In her relationship with Son, her ability to manipulate and silence him has no limit. Unsurprisingly, the male "have not" is at the mercy of situations and events beyond his control. Son finds the pressure of (married) life extremely hard to handle and copes by running away from the woman in his life only to realise that he cannot even afford to be on his own.

In Morrison, the black men who choose, mainly for ideological reasons, not to believe in money become social outcasts or a threat to mainstream American society. What all these men have in common, though, is a certain inability to go quickly beyond their own conceptions in order to come to grips with the complexity of the human reality that they are part of. □

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Abstract

Mens's power and the rhetoric of black women's. Visibility in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

This brief study deals with the issue of material wealth and the power that men derive from it in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*.

Résumé

Le présent article traite du problème de la richesse matérielle et du pouvoir qu'en tirent les hommes dans *Tar Baby* de Toni Morrison.