

“I’ll Tell”—The Function and Meaning of L in Toni Morrison’s *Love*^{*}

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Abstract

Composed of five sections, this paper attempts to investigate the identity and singularity of L in Toni Morrison’s latest work *Love* and addresses the various roles she plays in this complex narrative. Besides appropriating some of Wayne C. Booth’s ideas about narration, my investigation will also draw on Morrison’s new “Foreword” to *Love*, Morrison’s critical work “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” as well as on Faulkner’s discussion of his own narrative strategy in *Absalom, Absalom!*, which shares some of the narrative techniques used in *Love*. I argue that as a character L is an

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object of Bill Cosey's affection, and that as she is the narrative conduit, understanding L is key to understanding the novel because she is a vital component of its plot development, narrative structure, and perspective. As a character, L plays several vital roles in the Cosey family; similarly, as an insider-narrator, L provides the missing link to information unavailable to other characters. Moreover, she also takes on the function of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Finally, in giving voice to "Love" as the "I" narrator-cum-character, Morrison has constructed a distinctively African American form of narration, which in turn links the content back to the narrative.

Key Words: Toni Morrison, *Love*, L, chorus, ancestor

I. Prologue: Unmasking L

Love is an omnipresent motif in Toni Morrison's oeuvre. Starting first with Pecola Breedlove's futile search for love and identity in her prayers for a pair of blue eyes, in each of Morrison's subsequent works the theme of love or the lack thereof claims center stage. In a 1989 conversation with Bill Moyers, when asked what metaphor she would use if she were writing for the rest of the country about the 'inner city' today, Morrison answered, "Love. We have to embrace ourselves. Self-regard" (1994: 266). The publication of *Jazz* in 1992 attests to what Morrison said to Moyers three years before, as the novel adopts the metaphor of love to address the Harlem of the 1920s. Eleven years later, as if to resurrect the prevailing theme of her four-and-a-half-decade long writing career, Morrison co-opts the ubiquitous, four-letter word to title her 2003 novel. In a recent conversation with novelist Diane McKinney-Whetstone, Morrison expressed her intentions in writing *Love*: "I was interested in the way in which sexual love and other kinds of love lend themselves to betrayal" (2003: 206). In her 2005 "Foreword" to the Vintage International Edition of *Love*, Morrison reiterates her interest in employing the dual motif of love and betrayal:

People tell me that I am always writing about love. Always, always love. I nod, yes, but it isn't true—not exactly. In fact, I am always writing about betrayal. Love is the weather. Betrayal is the lightning that cleaves and reveals it. (2005: x)

In adopting the metaphor of love to dramatize the family saga of the Coseys, Morrison avails herself of an innovative narration technique. Apart from a stream-of-consciousness, nonlinear third-person limited narration in the nine roman-type chapters, *Love* also contains five first-person italicized soliloquies voiced by a female character mysteriously named L. While L's italicized narration begins the Cosey story, her remaining four soliloquies are

included at the end of Chapters 3, 4, 6 and 9, respectively. But in the end, who is L? What are the roles she plays in the novel? Why does Morrison interweave the third-person narratives with L's first-person narration?

This paper aims to investigate the identity and singularity of L and the various roles she plays in this complex narrative; by doing so, I hope to shed some light on her function and meaning. In my investigation, I will appropriate some of Wayne C. Booth's ideas about narration and will also draw on Morrison's "Foreword" to *Love*, and her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" as well as on what Faulkner has said about his own narrative strategy in *Absalom, Absalom!*. In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth makes a primary distinction between dramatized and impersonal narrators. In fiction, the narratologist writes, "as soon as we encounter an 'I,' we are conscious of an experiencing mind whose views of the experience will come between us and the event" (151-152). In this paper, I argue that as she is the narrative conduit, understanding L is key to understanding the novel, because she is a vital component of its plot development, narrative structure, and perspective.

At the textual center of *Love*, the third-person narrator recounts a 1971 quarrel that ensues with the death of Bill Cosey, the wealthy owner of the once-popular Cosey's Hotel and Resort and primary male protagonist of the novel. The three Cosey women—his widow Heed (the Night) Johnson, his daughter-in-law May, and his granddaughter Christine—argue in front of the lawyer over who "[has] a unique claim on Cosey's affection" and who "[has] either 'saved' him from some disaster or relieved him of an impending one" (98). The preburial quarrel takes place after "the [1958] menu was read for the 'will' it was taken to be" (97-98). While remaining reticent and seemingly indifferent during the preburial squabble, L, the hotel cook and dramatized narrator, prevents a fight at the grave site between Heed and Christine with a whispered, "I'll tell" (98). L's threat to "tell" helps restore order at the funeral, as Vida Gibbons explains: "Two words hissed into their faces stopped them cold" (34), because both Christine and

Heed know that “nothing L said ever was idle” (98). But what does she plan to tell? For the listeners as well as the reader, L’s threat to “tell” not only creates narrative tension but also textual ambiguity. Short and simple as it is, L’s “telling” whisper is actually ripe with significance, in view of the roles she plays in the unfolding tragedy of the Cosey family. In view of the covert “crimes” she has committed for their sake, L’s “I’ll tell” takes on a new meaning. As a character-cum-narrator, however, L does “tell” on them and on herself from a first-person perspective.

II. L as a Character

As a character, L plays a number of roles in the family saga of the Coseys. Ostensibly, she began cooking for Bill Cosey in 1923, shortly before the death of his first wife Julia and she remains in this position until the very day of his funeral in 1971. But what is her relationship with Bill Cosey, besides that of loyal chef? Based on textual clues scattered sporadically throughout the narration, I would like to propose that L is also an object of Bill Cosey’s affection, especially around the time of Julia’s death in 1923. In 1914, when L first saw Bill Cosey standing in the sea, holding Julia in his arms, the scene of love and tenderness must have made an indelible impression on the then five-year-old L. She describes the scene with heavy emotion:

I’d never seen anything like that. Her eyes were closed, head bobbing; her light blue swimming dress ballooned or flattened out depending on the waves and his strength. She lifted an arm, touched his shoulder. He turned her to his chest and carried her ashore. I believed then it was the sunlight that brought those tears to my eyes—not the sight of all that tenderness coming out of the sea. Nine years later, when I heard he was looking for house help, I ran all the way to his door. (64)

Another clue lies in their shared passion for the sea. Born in

Up Beach in rough weather, L has a self-professed natural liking for a good storm and for the ocean, which she personifies as her lover in her third soliloquy. Paralleling L, Bill Cosey has his own intimate connection with the ocean, as he is said to enjoy making love on the beach. In her third soliloquy, which begins with “*The ocean is my man now,*” L seems to hint at their intimate relationship:

He knows when to rear and hump his back, when to be quiet and simply watch a woman. He can be devious, but he's not a false-hearted man. His soul is deep down there and suffering. I pay attention and know all about him. That kind of understanding can only come from practice, and I had a lot of that with Mr. Cosey. (100)

“Looking after” Billy Boy and Bill Cosey upon Julia’s death, L presumably had a lot of opportunities for secret and intimate rendezvous with Bill Cosey on the beach. Five pages later, L reiterates their common interest:

You'd think since one of his women had a stroke after rooting with him in the sand, he'd avoid the beach as a setting for fun. But he didn't. He even spent his wedding night there, which proves how much he liked it. Good weather or foul. Me, too. (105)

The fact that the scribbled notes of his will, scrawled on a 1958 menu, include “his ’55 convertible to L” (88) also testifies to the depth of their unusual relationship. The final indication is that after his death, she and Celestial are, according to L, “*the only two who visit him*” at the cemetery (201).

Besides being Bill Cosey’s longtime cook and onetime secret lover, L, as a character, also serves several other pivotal roles. First of all, she acts as a surrogate mother for Billy Boy upon the death of Julia in 1923, and also for Christine after the death of Billy Boy in 1935. In her third soliloquy, L briefly mentions that when Julia Cosey died, she considered it “*the most natural thing in the world*”

for her to “*stay on and look after*” Billy Boy and Bill Cosey (100). Twelve years later, L takes up the responsibility of raising Billy Boy’s four-year-old daughter:

When Billy Boy died in '35, he went so fast we didn't have time to tend him. Christine crawled under my bed, and when I found her there, I let her sleep with me. She was never a crying child, so listening to her whimpering in her sleep was a comfort to me, since May looked on Billy Boy's death as more of an insult than a tragedy. Dry-eyed as a turtle, she left Christine to me to raise. (137)

In her final reconciliatory chat with the dying Heed in the 1990’s, Christine admits that “May wasn’t much of a mother” to her (184) and after Heed tells her how L died at Maceo’s Cafe—ria in 1975, she mentions that she misses L.

Secondly, L functions as an arbiter or peacemaker after Bill Cosey derails the girlhood friendship between Heed and Christine by choosing the pre-pubic Heed as his child bride, despite (or, because of, according to L) her lower class background. Cosey’s choice not only prompts the class-conscious May to turn Christine against her former best friend, but also warps the erstwhile harmonious relationship among Bill Cosey, May and Christine; under these circumstances, L serves as “the only peacemaker around, whether glaring or shaking her head, but she would take no one’s side” (133). At the initial stage of Heed’s marriage, L helps initiate her into womanhood and train her to become the mistress of Cosey’s Hotel and Resort. Indeed, as Heed acknowledges to Junior Viviane, L is one of her two saviors “in that puzzling world,” the other being her husband (129). Take, for example, the wedding gown Bill Cosey orders from Texas. As it was too big for Heed, L had to pin it for alteration. However, “the gown could not be found until the afternoon of the ceremony, when it was too late. L folded the cuffs, safety-pinned the hem” (76). L also teaches the young bride how to run the hotel, as the third-person narrator recollects through the perspective of Heed:

“L, who liked her in those days, taught her a lot and saved the life Papa had given her and her alone. She could never have navigated those treacherous waters if L hadn’t been the current” (76). In June 1947, when L sees Bill Cosey spanking Heed at Christine’s birthday dinner, she chastises him:

While he fumbled for something in his pocket and May and Christine were waiting in the car, I tapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t you never lay a hand on her again no matter what. Do, and I’m long gone.” He looked at me with Billy Boy’s eyes and said, “I made a mistake, L. A big mistake.” “Tell her,” I said. All I got was a sigh for an answer, and if I hadn’t been so agitated I would have known right then who he was sighing over. (140)

After 1955,¹ when May goes out of her mind and took to hiding and stealing things, it is L who prevents Heed from having May put away: “. . . as far back as 1960 Heed had begun to research ways to put her in a rest home or an asylum. But nothing Heed did . . . could force May out. With L watching and without an accomplice, Heed failed” (99). As the third-person narrator points out, “L’s judgment, more restraining than Cosey’s, stopped her” (97). As L herself says, “*And there’s not much sense in wasting time and life trying to put a woman in the asylum*” (140). In 1962 when

¹ According to L, the well-known 1955 historical event of Emmett Till brings about the change in May: “*And May’s behavior did go strange in 1955 when that boy from Chicago tried to act like a man and got beat to death for his trouble*” (104). Two other textual references to the same case appear on pages 81 and 164 respectively. Emmett Till was a black Chicago teenager who, while visiting his uncle in Mississippi in 1955, was accused of whistling at a white woman. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped, shot in the head, and thrown into a river. The white men charged with his murder were acquitted by an all-white jury. According to Ron David, “because of its flagrant brutality and injustice, the Emmett Till murder became a rallying point for the Civil Rights Movement.” In her 1986 stage play *Dreaming Emmett*, Toni Morrison let Emmett Till speak on his own behalf. In other words, Till was “brought back from the dead to describe his murder in his own words, from his point of view” (David, 2000: 22-23).

Mrs. Heed Cosey obliquely and mistakenly accuses the newly-hired hotel receptionist Vida Gibbons of stealing a marble pen, it is L who comes to her timely rescue. As the third-person narrator describes it,

Tears were marshaling to humiliate her further when rescue arrived, wearing a puffy white chef's hat. She held the fountain pen in her hand; stuck it in the holder, and, turning to Heed, said, "May. As you well know." (37)

Key to the development of the plot, however, are three interrelated acts which L undertakes in secret. Taking advantage of her vital position as chef, L keeps a 1958 menu on which a drunken Bill has scribbled the notes of a will. In 1971, when she reads Bill Cosey's real will, which she was not allowed to read in 1964 when she acted as a witness, L discovers to her righteous indignation that her employer intends to leave all his property to his secret paramour Celestial, all except for a boat which he wills to his fishing companion Sandler Gibbons. For the sake of justice, she first poisons the old man by putting foxglove in his drink² and then tears up the real will before the arrival of the undertaker:

There wasn't but one solution. Foxglove can be quick, if you know what you're doing, and doesn't hurt all that long. He wasn't fit to think, and at eighty-one he wasn't going to get better. It took nerve, and long before the undertaker knocked on the door, I tore that malicious thing up. My menu worked just fine. (201)

In murdering Bill Cosey and destroying the notarized will at the same time, L seals the fate of Celestial and prevents the surviving Cosey women from being turned out onto the street. While underscoring the fault lines of class difference between Celestial and the Cosey women, her seemingly cruel act also helps preserve

² The author wishes to thank Pin-chia Feng for alerting me to this important detail.

the overall positive public image of Bill Cosey.³

To conclude, in view of the various positive roles she plays in the Cosey drama, we may conclude that as a character, L represents an ancestor-like figure,⁴ like that of Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. According to Morrison, the presence of an ancestor is an important characteristic of African American writing. As she has said in “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” “there is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (1984: 343). Indeed, they provide not only wisdom, but love, of which L is the embodiment or incarnation. It is in fact her name, as she discloses in her final soliloquy: “if your name is the subject of *First Corinthians*, chapter 13, it’s natural to make it your business. You never know who or when it will hit or if it can stay the road” (199).⁵ Judging from what she has done for the Cosey family, it is safe to say that L as a character fits in nicely with the Apostle Paul’s definition of love, which is “very patient and kind, never jealous or envious, never boastful or proud, never haughty or selfish or rude. Love does not demand its own way. It is not irritable or

³ Ironically, this positive public image is shattered by L’s “telling” narration, as is shown in my subsequent sections.

⁴ In addition to L, Sandler Gibbons also serves as an ancestor figure. A loving family man, Sandler is known for his “forethought and common sense” (14). To prevent his grandson Romen from becoming another Bill Cosey, “forever on the prowl for a repeat of that first first time” (110), Sandler gives Romen timely advice about women, which in the end prompts the adolescent to escape from the clutches of Junior Viviane—a black *femme fatale*.

⁵ The thirteen verses in *First Corinthians*, chapter 13 elaborates on the importance of love. Likened to the background music in a movie (4), the humming L calls to mind the epigraph of *Jazz*, from a piece called “Thunder, Perfect Mind,” from the *Nag Hammadi*:

I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.

touchy. It does not hold grudges and will hardly even notice when others do it wrong. It is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out. If you love someone you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him" (*First Corinthians* 13: 4-8).

III. The Vantage Points of L as a Narrator

Besides being an important character, L also functions as a dramatized narrator in the tragedy of the Cosey family. But is she a reliable one? Why does Morrison open the novel with a first-person soliloquy and then embed four more at the end of four of the nine chapters, which themselves are related by an anonymous third-person narrator? How is L's italicized first-person narration related to the third-person narration? A close scrutiny of the novel reveals that L, as a character-narrator, provides the missing link to information that other characters are unable to access. As a dramatized narrator, L is not just an observer but a narrator-agent who, in the words of Booth, "produces some measurable effect on the course of events" (1983: 153). In creating this enigmatic character-cum-narrator, Morrison endows L not only with striking familiarity with the protagonist and sufficient knowledge about his family members and acquaintances, but also with a certain narrative distance and emotional detachment. As a quiet observer of the family drama of the Coseys, L functions like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Although her conjectures occasionally turn out later to be premature or inaccurate, from her vantage point, she possesses a broader, more expansive understanding of the "truth" than that of any other character.

First of all, as a longtime cook for Bill Cosey and as his clandestine paramour, L is privy to first-hand information and family secrets not known by other characters. For instance, the reticent cook knows that Bill Cosey inherited \$114,000 from his

father Daniel Robert Cosey, who “*had earned his way as a courthouse informer*” (67-68). As L further elaborates,

Well paid, tipped off, and favored for fifty-five years, Daniel Robert Cosey kept his evil gray eye on everybody. For the pure power of it, people supposed, because he had no joy, and the money he got for being at the beck and call of white folks in general and police in particular didn't bring comfort to him or his family. Whites called him Danny Boy. But to Negroes his initials, DRC, gave rise to the name he was known by: Dark. He worshiped paper money and coin, withheld decent shoes from his son and passable dresses from his wife and daughters, until he died leaving 114,000 resentful dollars behind. (68)

By contrast, May believes the family history that Bill Cosey bragged about in public; therefore, she thinks that “*Mr. Cosey came from a long line of quiet, prosperous slaves and thrifty freedmen—each generation adding to the inheritance left by the previous one*” (136). Actually, as L has indicated, “*That was the street-sweet story, anyway—the one that belonged to somebody else that she and Mr. Cosey took for themselves. He knew better, but May believed it*”(136).

Unlike other characters, as a dramatized narrator L also knows about the defining moment of her employer's childhood, how he once unknowingly participated in his father's racial treachery by helping him catch a poor black fugitive who had a large family to support. As L explains:

I remember him telling me a tale about some child who fell down in horse manure running after a posse and how the white folks laughed. So cruel, the crowd enjoying themselves at murder. He repeated it every time he needed an example of heartless whites. (139)

Besides L, Bill Cosey also confides this unforgettable childhood experience to young Sandler Gibbons, after they begin fishing together in 1964. While Sandler “wondered if Cosey laughed too”

(45), L in her first-person monologue “*supposed the point was he laughed too and apologized for it by marrying Heed. Just like he avoided Christine because she had his father’s gray eyes, he picked Heed to make old Dark groan*” (139). The troubling childhood experience clearly lent itself to a lifetime of guilt for the role Cosey played in the man’s capture; this guilt and his reaction to it would lead to the unraveling of the Cosey clan.

Moreover, as L points out, even while bragging about the exploits of his father and his son, Bill Cosey would never lie to her:

Mr. Cosey never lied to me. No point in it. I knew his first wife better than he did. I knew he adored her and I knew what she began to think of him after she found out where his money came from . . . she froze when she learned how blood-soaked her husband’s money was. (67-68)

Apart from her knowledge about Bill Cosey’s family background, L is said to have “fathomed his mind,” for after Julia’s death in 1923, she stays on to “look after” the crestfallen father and his twelve-year-old son:

even though I was only fourteen, it was the most natural thing in the world for me to stay on and look after the two of them. Only a wide heart like his could care that much for a wife and have so much room left over. (100)

In his discussion of inside views, Booth points out that “the most important single privilege is that of obtaining an inside view of another character because of the rhetorical power that such a privilege conveys upon a narrator” (1983: 160-161).

Perhaps more importantly, another advantage of choosing L as the first-person narrator lies in her emotional detachment and thus her ability to ground the story firmly in reality. Despite her secret affair with Bill Cosey, L is not related to him by blood or by marriage. Furthermore, as a person, she is presented as quiet, reliable, hardworking and wise:

My nature is a quiet one, anyway. As a child I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet. Later on I was thought to have the wisdom maturity brings. (3)

Indeed, L's narrative function in *Love* is similar to Shreve McCannon's—Quentin Compson's Canadian roommate at Harvard—in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. In his response to a question about the narrative role Shreve and Quentin play in their historical reconstruction of the Thomas Supten story, Faulkner's answer seems to hold vital clues that may shed some light on Morrison's L:

Shreve was the commentator that held the thing to something of reality. If Quentin had been let alone to tell it, it would have become completely unreal. It had to have a solvent to keep it real, keep it believable, creditable, otherwise it would have vanished into smoke and fury. (Faulkner, 1959: 75)

Indeed, the same thing would have happened if any of the Cosey women had been left to tell the Cosey story. As a "solvent," L's narration serves, in part, to lay bare the limitations of the partial or twisted viewpoints of the other women: Heed, Christine, May, Vida Gibbons and even Junior Viviane, who are together, in one way or another, obsessed with Bill Cosey.⁶

⁶ As these women are emotionally involved in the Cosey affair, their views of Bill Cosey (and each other) are necessarily subjective and partial. For example, Vida Gibbons reminisces about Bill Cosey as "the county's role model" and "a powerful, generous friend" (37, 45) while her husband considers him an old reprobate chasing women his whole life. Junior Viviane fantasizes about him as her "Good Man," a benign father figure she has dreamed about: "As soon as she saw the stranger's portrait she knew she was home. She had dreamed him the first night, had ridden his shoulders through an orchard of green Granny apples heavy and thick on the boughs" (60). Junior's fantasy of Bill Cosey as her "Good Man" reappears later on page 118: "They recognized each other the very first night when he gazed at her from his portrait. But it was in dream they got acquainted. No fuss, no

But what are we to make of the striking discrepancy over L's dual roles? As a character, she washes her hands of the Cosey business right after Bill Cosey's funeral in 1971; four years later, she is said to drop dead at the stove at Maceo's while smothering pork chops (189). As a narrator, however, L seems to transcend the ravages of time, as, in her second soliloquy, this ageless cook says that she still works at Maceo's Cafe—ria in the fictional present, which is set in the 1990s. As Morrison has elucidated in her "Foreword," the first-person narrator is

not restricted by chronology or space—or the frontier between life and not-life. Thus the character called "L" is meant to exhibit and represent the imaginative and transformative nature of her name along with its constructive and destructive talents. (2005: x-xi)

Acknowledging herself as "*an old woman embarrassed by the world*" and proclaiming that her below-range, private humming is her way of "*objecting to how the century is turning out*" (4), L appears to serve as the spokeswoman for the implied author.⁷

bother, no recriminations—he lifted her up to his shoulders, where she rode through an orchard of green Granny apples." Likewise, Heed's recounting to Junior of her dead husband and their relationship is fraught with sugarcoating, presumably because she erroneously perceives herself as the real "sweet Cosey child" Cosey had in mind. For Christine, May's "prodigal daughter" who ends up being a servant for her childhood friend, now Mrs. Cosey, her grandfather is reduced to being "the dirty one who introduced her to nasty and blamed it on her" and "the powerful one who abandoned his own kin and transferred rule to her playmate" (165). By contrast, L's viewpoint is more balanced and objective. Instead of idolizing or slandering Bill Cosey, L perceives her employer as "*an ordinary man ripped, like the rest of us, by wrath and love*" (200).

⁷ Another possible interpretation is to look at L's narrative voice as that of a haunting ghost. As Ping-chia Feng points out, "L's first-person voice from beyond the grave cradles and interweaves the variegated third-person narrative into a story of love." Drawing upon Barbara Christian's analysis of the haunting ghost in *Beloved*, Feng further indicates that the return of the ghost in *Love* is Morrison's way of enacting a fixing ceremony (2004: 14).

IV. L as a Choric Narrator

In supplying the needed information, commenting on a given event, and giving opinions and warnings, L functions, in a way, like the chorus in ancient Greek theatre. As Aristotle mentions in *Poetics*, the chorus “should be regarded as one of actors; it should be an integral part of the whole, and share in the action, in the manner not of Euripides but of Sophocles” (1989: 92).⁸ As a first-person narrator, Morrison’s L fills the simultaneous choric roles of actor, witness, and commentator. Historically, Greek theatre evolved from ritual and dance with a strong choral focus, to a greater emphasis upon its dramatic role. Indeed, Morrison’s L is equipped with all of the following features that characterize the Greek chorus. First of all, just as the first function of the Greek chorus is as narrator (telling stories, providing information), L too serves this function. Secondly, the chorus works within the limits of the plot as characters, or from outside the action as impartial commentators; likewise, L plays the role of character and commentator simultaneously. Third, like the Greek chorus, which is the ideal spectator, providing commentary and questions, offering opinions and warnings, and clarifying the experiences and feelings of characters in everyday terms, in Morrison’s *Love* L performs a similarly dual role of spectator and moralist. Lastly, just as music is an integral part of the Greek chorus, L as a narrator is distinguished by her humming, which both begins and ends her italicized narration. If rhythmic dance constitutes a key feature of the chorus in establishing a lyrical mood, the rhythmic dance of the words across the page is a cornerstone of L’s commentary. As she explains: “*The words dance in my head to the music in my mouth*” (3).

⁸ According to Albert Weiner, Sophoclean choruses are more relevant to the plot, more integrated into the tragedies than Euripidean choruses (1980: 210).

Actually, the role of the chorus is not something new for Toni Morrison. In her seminal essay entitled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison points out that one of the distinctive elements of African American writing is its "oral quality, and the participation of the reader and the chorus" (1984: 343). She defines the chorus as "the community or the readers at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead" (1984: 341).⁹ Take for example the second soliloquy placed at the end of Chapter Three titled "Stranger." Following the third-person narrator's account of the background of Heed's newly-employed secretary named Junior Viviane, L steps in to comment on the rudderless young sexpot, who frequents Maceo's Cafe—ria, where she works as chef. In her third and fourth soliloquies, L fills in the third-person narrator's gaps during the retrospection of the now aging Heed and Christine. In the former, L offers quite a few narrative details about Bill Cosey's biography from roughly 1923 onward, while in the latter she provides lengthy explanations for the change in May after Cosey's marriage to Heed. As the third-person narrator only gives a sketchy account of May and Bill Cosey, who have been dead for over two decades in the fictional present,¹⁰ L as a dramatized narrator supplies what she has known about them since 1920's.

Finally, what is the purpose of Morrison's narrative framing device?¹¹ Like the choral note, L's humming in the opening

⁹ Indeed, Morrison remarks that there has always been a choral note in the books she has written, "whether it is the 'I' narrator of *Bluest Eye*, or the town functioning as a character in *Sula*, or the neighborhood and the community that responds in the two parts of town in *Solomon*. Or, as extreme as I've gotten, all of nature thinking and feeling and watching and responding to the action in *Tar Baby*: the trees hurt, fish are afraid, clouds report, and the bees are alarmed" (1984: 341-342).

¹⁰ In "Friend" and "Lover," the third-person narrator allows Sandler Gibbons to reflect upon his conversations with Bill Cosey during their fishing trips.

¹¹ In his study of the story structure in *Absalom, Absalom!*, Philip J. Egan pinpoints two structural patterns that recur frequently in the spoken stories. One is the "frame structure," in which "a given narrative element or object both introduces and concludes the tale." The other recurring pattern is

soliloquy outlines the setting of the story, offers background information and supplies key elements in the Cosey plot. In so doing, she makes comments, gives opinions or warnings, and puts forth an explanation of a given event. At this point of her narration, the shards of information she drops appear disjointed and formless and serve as nebulous and often ominous hints about the future. For instance, it is not until L's third soliloquy that the reader realizes what the first-person narrator means when she hums "*Listen to me: something else was to blame*" (9). Other shards of information that remain disjointed include the recurrent image of "Police-heads" and the identity of the named and unnamed characters, like the three persons L mentions only in passing in the following sentence, "*Like that woman who furrowed in the sand with her neighbor's husband and the very next day suffered a stroke at the cannery*"(5).

If L's prologue provides a terse outline of the Cosey story, her final narration brings to light several key questions about the novel.¹² Over the course of her commentary, L clarifies the mystery surrounding her name. Furthermore, L's shocking disclosure of her only "solution" solves the puzzles concerning the cause of Cosey's death, the identity of "my sweet Cosey child" and the matter of the "will." The Bill Cosey that emerges out of her "telling" is "*a good bad man, or a bad good man*" (200): he marries pre-pubic Heed Johnson out of a combined motive of pedophilia and personal guilt and, in 1964, wills all his property to his paramour Celestial (except a boat he leaves to his fishing companion Sandler Gibbons) because the heirless old man began to hate the Cosey women, who

"tragic biography," thus called because the story focuses upon a character's life, or significant part of it, and shows the character futilely grappling with the same problems over a period of years" (1983: 187). In the intriguing family tragedy of love, betrayal and revenge, L's italicized narration fits in to the structural pattern of the "frame structure."

¹² By holding back crucial components of the Cosey story until the very end of the narrative, the first-person narrator (as well as the author) triggers a strong sense of suspense in the reader.

“disappointed him” first, then “defied him,” then “turned his home into a barrel of quarreling she-crabs and his life’s work into a cautionary lesson in black history” (201). Finally, as is suggested by L’s remarks—“My mother knew them [Police-heads] when she was a girl” (5) and “Only when the resort failed did they sneak off like pickpockets from a breadline” (6)—the recurrent image of Police-heads seems to symbolize the crimes committed during and after the segregation by the corrupt white police (especially Sheriff Buddy Silk and his son Boss Silk) and race traitors like Dark and probably Bill Cosey.

Finally, in giving voice to “Love” as the “I” narrator-cum-character, Morrison has constructed a form of narration distinctive of African American literature in general, but of Toni Morrison in particular, one that is, in a sense, in keeping with the content of her narrative. In other words, form functions as meaning in *Love*. As in *Jazz*, in which Morrison began to experiment with an innovative method of narration, here she took up a new challenge by juxtaposing the first-person narration with the third, which tends to be partial and fragmentary. In so doing, the Nobel laureate has subverted the traditional Western theory of narration. As she explains in her “Foreword” to *Love*,

I like so much the challenge that writing *Jazz* gave me: breaking or dismissing conventional rules of composition to replace them with other, stricter rules. In that work, the narrative voice was the book itself, its physical and spatial confinement made irrelevant by its ability to imagine, invent, interpret, err, and change. In *Love*, the material (forms of love, kinds of betrayal) struck me as longing for a similar freedom—but this time with an embodied, participating voice. (2005: x)

What develops out of Morrison’s juxtaposition of L’s “embodied, participating voice” with the other characters’ partial or competing viewpoints is a distinctively Morrisonian metanarrative. By cross-referencing L’s first-person perspective with the other

characters' partial insights, the reader is able to understand why "the effort to love" lies at the heart of how "ordinary people end up ruining the thing they most want to protect" (McKinney-Whetstone, 2003: 206).

V. Epilogue: The Voice of Love as Form and Content

In spite of the mystery that surrounds her, L is an important character and narrator in her own right, and as such, helps drive the novel's narrative structure and plot development. As a character, L plays a number of roles in the Cosey family. She is not only an indispensable cook helping her employer develop the lucrative Cosey's Hotel and Resort, but also serves as Bill Cosey's secret lover, particularly around 1923 when his first wife passes away. In addition, she acts as a surrogate mother for Billy Boy in the wake of Julia's death in 1923, as well as for Christine upon Billy Boy's sudden demise in 1935. After Cosey's fateful marriage to the eleven-year-old Heed Johnson in 1942, L functions as a mediating peacemaker. L as a reticent character contributes significantly to the spectacular development of the plot; upon reading Bill Cosey's notarized will in 1971, L performs two consequential acts in secret: she first poisons the eighty-one-year-old patriarch who had decided to will all his property to his secret lover, and then destroys the real will. In so doing, L not only keeps the overall positive image of her onetime lover intact but also shapes the fate of Celestial and the three Cosey women. Moreover, L as a wise and just peacemaker plays the important role of ancestor, as defined by Morrison. Finally, in view of all the roles she plays, L aptly constitutes the very embodiment of love.

In her latest novel Morrison creates a nearly nameless, humming, first-person choric narrator-cum-character. Of the multiple points of view Morrison employs in *Love*, L's voice remains no less important than that of the third-person anonymous

narrator. As a narrator, L performs a number of different, but equally vital functions. First of all, being an insider with a relatively panoramic view of Cosey's life and death, she provides the missing link to information that is unavailable to other characters. Secondly, as a spectator of (and participant in) the family drama of the Coseys, L functions like the chorus in a Greek tragedy. Over the course of her narration, she supplies needed information, comments upon given events, gives opinions and warnings and offers basically plausible explanations of key plot points. Despite her occasional lapses into speculation, L, as the incarnation of love, has more access than other characters to the inner workings of the Cosey family. Because of her emotional detachment, her narration not only brings other characters' blind spots and biases into bold relief, but also sheds new light and offers an alternative perspective on the events. Indeed, hers is an "embodied, participating" maternal voice that counter-balances the third-person patriarchal narratives which are filtered through the mind or eye of the other characters, who are "so full of secrets and partial insights" (Morrison, 2005: x). This echoes Faulkner's response to a question about the narrative viewpoints and the depiction of truth in *Absalom, Absalom!*:

I think that no one individual can look at truth. It blinds you. You look at it and you see one phase of it. Someone else looks at it and sees a slightly awry phase of it. But taken all together, the truth is in what they saw . . . It was, as you say, thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird. But the truth, I would like to think, comes out, that when the reader has read all these thirteen different ways of looking at the blackbird, the reader has his own fourteenth image of that blackbird which I would like to think is the truth. (1959: 273-274)

By cross-referencing L's first-person narration with the third-person narratives, the reader is eventually able to come up with his or her own version of the Cosey story and glimpse a shimmer of truth amidst the collision of multiple narrative viewpoints. To

readers familiar with Morrison's work, what emerges from this collision is not only an enticing narrative on narrative but also in its critique of pedophilia and the erotic carnality of the modern age, a well-crafted literary representation of "the effort to love."

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「我會說出來的」——
L在童妮·摩里森 *Love* 中的功用與意義

何文敬

摘 要

本論文分五部分，旨在探討童妮·摩里森近作*Love*中L的特殊身份與她在該複雜敘事中所扮演的多種角色。除了援引韋恩·布殊的敘事理念外，也採用摩里森在新版*Love*中所寫的〈前言〉與〈紮根：長者為根基〉，以及福克納針對《押沙龍啊，押沙龍！》之敘事策略所做的回應，蓋兩者之敘事技巧有些共通之處。筆者主張：L身為人物乃是比爾·柯西的早期情人；了解L允為了解整部小說之關鍵，因為L身為敘事管線乃是情節發展、敘事結構與觀點的重要組件，身為小說人物，L在柯西家中扮演數個要角。身為圈內人兼敘事者，L間接提供了其他人物無法取得的訊息。此外，她負有希臘悲劇中合誦隊之功能。最後，以「love」作為第一人稱敘事者兼人物，摩里森建構了具有非裔美國特色的敘事形式，進而將小說內容與敘事本身緊密結合。

關鍵詞：童妮·摩里森、*Love*、L、合誦隊、長者