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LIT 149D: The Novels of Toni Morrison

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### The Relationship Between Feminine Wisdom and Exile

A consistent theme among Toni Morrison's novels is the idea that wisdom lies with women who have been outcasted from their communities. People are fearful of what they are unable to understand — thus, women who possess knowledge of and experience with the spiritual realm are threatening to people and communities that practice a belief system that does not acknowledge spirituality as real, much less as having any claim to truth. Such is the case in *Paradise* as Consolata Sosa — the matriarch of the Convent — has a form of wisdom that is derived from her spiritual capabilities, as well as the exclusion she has faced as a result of those abilities. Connie is demonized as a witch and a devil by the people in Ruby because they are frightened by the thought that she may understand more than they do, or be capable of things they are not. However, *Paradise* makes clear that the conflict between Ruby and the Convent is not one about blame or victimhood or morality; rather, the novel seeks to address how it is that imaginings of paradise are always limited in some way. Moreover, the idea of paradise is always defined by those who are excluded from it and because the Convent women represent the destruction of Ruby as their paradise, the community outcasts, demonizes, and plots to kill these women. Connie is outcast from Ruby on the basis of this community's supposed religious, moral authority — thereby making her status as a pariah, and the knowledge she has gained as a result of that label, integral to the character of her wisdom.

The wisdom that Consolata possesses is countercultural in nature — meaning that the insight she has is derived from the consistent exclusion she has faced all her life. As a young orphan, Connie was kidnapped from her home country of Brazil and taken to the Convent by a nun named Mary Magna with whom she developed an intimate bond. The abandoned embezzler's house in Oklahoma was originally intended to be a school for native and colored girls, but it gradually lost its educational purposes and became known as the Convent. The town of Ruby was soon thereafter established and when Mary Magna died, Connie inherited her role as Mother to the women living there. Connie's position as the matriarch of the Convent directly opposes Deek and Steward Morgan as the patriarchs of Ruby; as a result, she becomes alienated from Ruby and faces disapproval from the people that consider themselves to be part of that community. By way of this contrast, the specific character of Connie's wisdom is highlighted. She recognizes the women in her company in their totality through the acknowledgment of faults, imperfections, vices, and demons without condemnation. Connie observes that "Not only did they do nothing except the absolutely necessary, they had no plans to do anything. Instead of plans they had wishes — foolish babygirl wishes" (222). She does not attempt to make excuses for Mavis, GiGi, Seneca, and Pallas; Connie's view of these women is inclusive of their lack of resolve. Despite her dislike and outright disapproval of them at times, Connie maintains that these women are deserving of kindness and protection. Moreover, the love that Connie shows to the Convent women is not done with any expectation that they repent for their sins, nor does she stress the need for salvation despite her own religious convictions. The Convent not only provides shelter from the brutality of the outside world, but also grants the women protection from their own secrets. Recognizing how these women are haunted by the versions of themselves they were or wish to be, Connie teaches each of them to see what they truly hunger for (262).

She has created the feeling of home that each of them had lost before arriving at the Convent — there they are free to express the pain they have endured and to do whatever they please believing that Connie will accept them just as they are. While the term wisdom usually has a positive connotation, Toni Morrison complicates that association by demonstrating that, in the case of Connie, the possession of wisdom does not automatically imply good judgment or righteousness as well. Connie is an alcoholic with severe depressive episodes; her ability to listen without judgment is significantly aided by alcohol's numbing sensation. Although Connie is not saintly or without faults of her own, her desire to provide a safe space in which women can live without constant judgment from men is fueled by how demonized the Convent women have become in Ruby. The wisdom with which Connie establishes the Convent as a family of their own is a product of her disagreement with a culture based on exclusion.

The rejection that Connie meets in Ruby is further informed by her transcendence of the traditional dichotomy between religion and all other belief systems — her wisdom is derived from experiencing ambiguity in a way that evades the understanding of others. With the help of Lone DuPres, Connie realizes her ability to save and prolong life through an act that Lone calls “stepping in”. However, when Lone attempted to further instruct Connie about her gift, “Consolata complained that she did not believe in magic; that the church and everything holy forbade its claims to knowingness and its practice” (244). Connie’s religious habits and convictions were deeply entrenched — the knowledge of her ability to raise the dead unnerved her. Yet, “Troubling as it was, yoking the sin of pride to witchcraft, she came to terms with it in a way she persuaded herself would not offend Him or place her soul in peril” (247). Instead of using Lone’s term “stepping in,” Connie called the act “seeing in;” thus, her gift became a matter of sight that anyone could cultivate should they have the desire. Moreover, Connie starts to lose

her physical sight shortly after using her ability to prolong the life of Mary Magna — thus beginning Connie's paradoxical embodiment of blindness and wisdom for "The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her 'in sight' became" (247). In this sense, the spiritual gift of 'in sight' granted Connie a form of insight that she had previously been unaware of or chosen to suppress altogether. Losing her sight is a blessing — the visual distractions of the world are now gone and she can see more clearly what goes on in the minds of others. She has developed a way in which to employ her religious beliefs and spiritual capabilities in tandem with one another. In Ruby where religion is paramount, Connie's connection to the spiritual realm and her unwillingness to enforce any kind of religious discipline in the Convent is alarming, thus the majority of the townspeople condemn Connie as sacrilegious. Ruby was founded by a group of devoutly religious men who viewed their relationship with and ability to impact the physical world as a manifestation of their relationship with God. Contrastingly, the Convent women feel no connection to the material world or its possessions, which is reminiscent of their inherent connection to spirituality. The diametric opposition between religion and spirituality is widely accepted in Ruby and Connie too believed that all other forms of belief were witchcraft. Yet, this antagonism becomes convoluted when Connie learns that, despite her initial revulsion, her gift belongs to her and she cannot will it away. The wisdom that Connie possesses is countercultural in that her practice of spirituality, even while maintaining her belief in God, is completely denounced in Ruby; consequently, her life must be lived within the walls of the Convent.

Connie's simultaneous belief in both religion and spirituality, and the knowledge she has acquired from reconciling seemingly opposing forces within herself, illustrates another dimension of the motivations behind Ruby's complete exclusion of the Convent women from their community. The Convent women are perceived to be a threat to the sanctity of Ruby not

only because their behavior and actions are seen as unholy, but because they are outsiders. The sense of pride people feel in Ruby is due to their connection to the founding families of their town, which informs subsequent unwillingness to allow any outsider to be accepted in their community. Moreover, Ruby is a devoutly religious place in which the moral authority that people feel, especially among men, comes from their conviction that their collective actions are in accordance with God's will. Contrastingly, the Convent women are seen as devious and sacrilegious, particularly due to the assumption that these women performed an abortion on Arnette Fleetwood. Arnette became pregnant with K.D.'s child when they were unmarried, thus making the child illegitimate; after attempting to abort the baby herself, Arnette gives birth to the child at the Convent where it died a few days later due to the harm it suffered in the womb. When Arnette arrived at the Convent, "She was not anxious, as might have been expected, but revolted by the work of her womb. A revulsion so severe it cut mind from body and saw its flesh-producing flesh as foreign, rebellious, unnatural, diseased" (249). Connie could not fathom why this girl was so disgusted by her own body; but in relation to Ruby's religiously motivated demonization of all illicit acts, it is unsurprising why Arnette refused to hold or look at the child she had given birth to. Furthermore, when invited to attend the reception of K.D. and Arnette's wedding, the women who reside at the Convent do not abide by the same standards of behavior that are practiced in Ruby. The way they dress is condemned as sexually promiscuous and the bluntness of their speech is appallingly rude to the men and women who are always careful to remain proper. The independence of the women at the Convent threatens the male authority that is exercised and respected in Ruby; the men's inability to control these women or force them to abide by their expectations implies that their dominion is not all-encompassing. As a result of how threatening these women are to the foundations of their community, a group of Ruby men

resolve to kill the women in the Convent. They see themselves as divinely protected and justified, as evidenced in the continued success of the all-black community that their ancestors established generations ago. Ruby is a manifestation of God's desire for His people to be self-sufficient; thus, the men's resolve to murder the Convent women is an extension of His will.

Toni Morrison's novels do not present a clear divide between right and wrong, oppressor and oppressed, holy and unholy because the relationships she showcases cannot be reduced to simple dichotomies. Moreover, the lack of labels in Morrison's novels compels readers to forgo the assumptions they bring - either consciously or subconsciously - to a narrative and instead earnestly engage with the text. In her interview with Charlie Rose, Morrison suggests that if one reads *Paradise* without any preconceived notions or expectations, they will understand that the Convent women are not saints and the men of Ruby are not devils, nor is the opposite true. Consolata's refusal to speak the language of the condemnation is reflective of the wisdom of the novel as a whole. Connie's wisdom is reinforced via her exclusion from Ruby — her ability to reconcile religion and spirituality in her own beliefs opposes the limited capacity to only accept one; the love Connie extends to people regardless of whether they are deserving or not stands in contrast to the exclusionary acceptance that is practiced in Ruby. Regardless of the differences between the Convent and Ruby, both represent interpretations of paradise; because all the women who reside in the Convent have sinned, this version of paradise is fundamentally flawed, just as in Ruby. Connie's lifelong experience with exclusion has taught her that earthly paradise does not exist and that knowledge is the defining factor in her unique wisdom.