

(as Joan Didion once put it) so as to generate complex metaphors of tragedy, self-knowledge, and liberation. There is, in other words, a clear line of development from naming to *flying*. It is a progress of which all are capable if they only grasp, as Morrison points out and Myers explains, how it all begins with names.

In Part IV of her article, Myers sets aside the explicit emphasis on naming and language that informs her prior analysis, focusing instead on the thematic question of opposing assumptions, forces, and beliefs, and the disabling dialectical mindset that creates them. This is, perhaps, as it should be, since the basic thrust of Morrison's own work is toward the perception and power that grow out of an attentiveness to individual words.

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Critique

There is always something final, of having said much of what appears to need saying, when we deal with opposites, when we discuss anything in terms of antipodes. Linda Buck Myers's article, "Perception and Power through Naming: Characters in Search of a Self in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," gives me this feeling; and, having considered the matter, she has not "said everything," but she has pointed the way and perceptively located what should become a main vein in the study of Toni Morrison. Language has always been the very stuff of literature, and Myers is correct in highlighting Morrison's clear desire to name anew, to baptize, as it were, the words we prosaically use in order to turn the language into a tool to provide readers with new ways of looking at black Americans. Semiotics has taught us that language does and does not designate, that it names in naming and not naming; and, having thus named, that our very words decree the interpretation of everything we see. This last, to be sure, is a currently fashionable reworking of the basic ideas that Edward Sapir first broached in *Language* (1921), and Myers brings much of this heritage to explain Morrison's work. Morrison says something like: "Look, this is how many Americans tend to look at blacks in America, and this is why we see them as we do." She says further: "But this, my readers, is not what the black world is. In many ways, this world is shaped, like everything else, by the perspectives imposed on it; if you, however,

understand the nature and the whys of these perspectives, then you will paradoxically see the tragedy and the triumph of the black experiences that I write about." Morrison is easily among the best writers using English today, and Myers recognizes and anchors her article on this fact.

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Critique

Linda Buck Myers's "Perception and Power Through Naming" is an especially interesting and perceptive analysis of some of the unique ways in which Toni Morrison uses language to develop meaning through characterization; and the article deals with issues that are at the thematic core of Morrison's four published novels. Indeed, the subtitle of the article, "Characters in Search of a Self in the Fiction of Toni Morrison," is perhaps a more accurate description of what the author properly finds to be basic to an understanding of Morrison's fiction. The need for people to achieve self-identity within a societal framework is, as the article suggests, what Morrison believes to be the way to happiness. It is because of their failure (both from within and from external forces) to fuse that seeming duality that Morrison's characters so often are tragic figures. The sense of community or social responsibility (or whatever the tag) is crucial to self-identity in Morrison's novels. Societal membership entails awareness of who one is and of where one came from; the tragedy that befalls Morrison's characters stems from their inability to reach out for the sake of others and for the sake of themselves—to become loving, caring, whole people. And, ultimately, the hope that Morrison sees is conveyed by the very tone of her novels, which reveals her own sense of loving and caring—her refusal, for example, to reject the Sulas and Maureens and Jadines.

Myers does an excellent job of describing some of the depths and complexities of Morrison's novels. Actually, my major criticism of the article is that it is overly ambitious, that it attempts to analyze more