

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.

—Marco A. Portales
University of Houston, Clear Lake

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

aspects of the meaning of Morrison's novels and the way those meanings are developed than can be handled within the framework of a relatively short piece. Indeed, the title, "Perception and Power Through Naming," promises a more sharply limited discussion than is actually presented. Among other things, the article deals with some of the principal and unique ways in which Morrison uses language as a means of "defining." "Naming" is but one of them, and it is dealt with only partially.

A very different point: The article begins and ends with a reference to the exchange between Humpty Dumpty and Alice. But in concluding that "to Alice's question . . . about 'whether you can make words mean so many things,' Morrison's work stands as an emphatic affirmative response," Myers appears to misread the point of the passage from *Through the Looking Glass*. Lewis Carroll ridicules Humpty Dumpty's arbitrariness, for while words may mean many things, one cannot make them mean whatever one chooses. Note the exchange that precedes the quoted passage, Humpty Dumpty states:

"There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice said.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said . . . "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

Toni Morrison uses words in unique and unusually imaginative ways, but, unlike Humpty Dumpty, she always uses them accurately.

But aside from a few negative criticisms, such as the foregoing, the article offers far more that is commendable. Most important is the author's ability to reach right to the core of meaning for each of the four novels and to delineate that meaning succinctly and clearly (though I think she may be a little less successful in dealing with *Tar Baby* than with the other three). The range of subject in Myers's article and the number of significant and perceptive observations is impressive.

—Richard L. Herrnstadt
Iowa State University