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# ***Tar Baby***

by

**Toni Morrison**  
**1981**



MonkeyNotes by PinkMonkey Staff

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## KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

### SETTING

The action of the novel takes place at the villa L'Arbe de la Croix on the Isle des Chevaliers in the Caribbean, in New York, Elie and on Queen of France. All the events take place in the latter half of the twentieth century in various parts of the United States and Caribbean. In the prologue, Son, the protagonist leaves his ship, (near the Queen of France) and swims toward an island, the Isle des Chevaliers, where he.....

### CHARACTER LIST

#### Major Characters

**Son** - He is a handsome young black man who has worked as a sailor. He falls passionately in love with a black city girl, Jadine and she changes some of his deeply held values and beliefs. He is a unique person with individualistic ideas and deep roots in 'nature.' He is sensitive and sensuous and does not like the brash city life of New York. He would like to formulate and obey his own laws, not those of society. To an extent he is a rebel but he inwardly longs for the comfort and security of home and hearth.

**Jadine** - She is an attractive young black girl who works as a model in New York and Paris. She is independent minded yet vulnerable. Her inner conflicts arise due to feeling alienated from her roots. She is threatened by the traditional roles of a woman that she does not want to get trapped by yet she also discounts her ethnic heritage which is an important element of who she is.

**Valerian** - Valerian Street is a white man who is fairly rich and has moved to Isle des Chevaliers to retire. He lives in a fantasy world, married to a beautiful woman named Margaret and ignores much of the world around him except what he wants to acknowledge as real. He is an obstinate man with strange quirks and interests.

**Margaret** - She is Valerian's wife and her extraordinary beauty enamored Valerian. After her marriage, she does not know what to do with herself and is bored. She gives birth to their only son-- Michael but .....

Many additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

### CONFLICT

**Protagonist** - Son is the protagonist. The novel revolves around his actions and the reader is introduced to him in the prologue. He initiates the important events in the story by entering the Valerian household and forcing all its occupants to confront themselves and their fears and insecurities. Son has a.....

**Antagonist** - There is not one clear antagonist in the novel, though antagonistic situations do exist. The conflicts arise due to ideological differences between the characters and because of inner conflicts. Son is the protagonist who is fighting to win Jadine to his way of thinking about her lack of .....

**Climax** - The story reaches its climax when Son and Therese are in a boat headed toward Isle des Chevaliers. She asks him to join the blind horsemen (legendary folk) of the hills instead of returning to Jadine. According to her, Jadine has nothing to give him as she has lost her ancient properties. It is.....

**Outcome** - The outcome of the story remains uncertain and clouded with mystery. The reader never definitely gets to know whether Son joins the wild men or whether he goes to the villa to get Jadine's address in France. Morrison does hint that Son might have gone more into himself when she writes .....

### SHORT PLOT / CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

A sailor named Son jumps ship near the coast of the Queen of France. He wants to swim to the pier but the sea

currents make this difficult. He sees a small craft nearby and climbs aboard it, thinking it will take him to his destination, but the women who are in it go to Isle des Chevaliers. After they leave the boat, he gets out as well. He ends up at the villa, L'Arbe de la Croix, in search of food and water. He lives for a few days near the house, only sneaking in at night to get food.

In the meantime, the reader is introduced to the occupants of the villa and their individual personalities. Each has a unique history that is presented to the reader in the 'stream of consciousness' method. Valerian, the owner of the villa, has recently retired from his position at the head of a candy factory. His wife Margaret is with him. Sydney and Ondine are the black couple who look after the house and serve their employers. Jadine is Sydney's niece and she has come down to the villa to take a break and sort her life out. She is trying to decide whether or not to marry one of the three white men who are wooing her.

The reader learns about the lives of these people at the villa and witnesses their mutual conflicts. One night Margaret finds Son hiding in her closet. Sydney brings him down and surprisingly Valerian is not angry. He asks him to stay in the guesthouse and have Sydney and Ondine look after him. They are all incensed by the decision of a stranger staying as a guest, but soon Son manages to soothe everyone's nerves. A yardman (whose real name is Gideon) takes an instant liking to him, as does the washerwoman, Therese. Margaret is expecting her son and two guests to come down for Christmas but they do not turn up. On .....

## **THEMES**

### **Major Themes**

The major themes in the novel are urbanity and myth concerning one's concept of identity and blackness, nature and its relationship to humans, relationships between men and women and blacks and whites as well as the conflicts arising from keeping one's myths in tact in order to evade confronting oneself. Each of the characters in this novel come to terms with confronting the myths that they have constructed in order to survive. The novel also explores white and black relationships in the villa in terms of the history and myth as well as class. Son's passion for Jadine forms a major theme of the novel. A large part of the novel is.....

### **Minor Themes**

A novel about African American people always involves many sub-themes such as what it means to be black, and the influence of the past on the present as well as what is the relationship that a black person has.....

## **MOOD**

*Tar Baby* is a novel written in a highly lyrical voice and therefore contains a magical and sometimes ethereal quality. It combines various tones that relate to nature and man, and urbanity and myth. Mostly its mood is focused on the sensuous aspects of nature as well as human relationships, though.....

## **BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY**

Toni Morrison is an American author and educator who was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her original name is Chloe Anthony Wofford and she was born of parents whose families had been sharecroppers in the American south. She graduated from Howard University in 1953 and earned a master's degree in English from Cornell University two years later. She has worked as a book editor and taught literature at several universities, notably Princeton University. Her marriage to Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect, ended in divorce.

In 1993 she won a Noble Peace Prize for her novels that are said to be "characterized by visionary force and poetic import." She was the first African American woman to win this prize. Her memorable characters are made transcendental by the particularity and skill with which she draws them. As an.....

## **HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

Many years ago when Toni Morrison was an editor working at Random House, she would ride the New York City subways and spin her stories in her imagination. Those same stories won Morrison, 62, the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature, the greatest honor in the world of books. Awarded by the Swedish Academy, the prize is worth \$825,000. Morrison is the first black woman ever to win and only the second American woman so honored.

"I am outrageously happy," she said in a statement. "Winning as an American is very special, but winning as a black American is a knockout. Most important, my mother is alive to share this delight....."

## **CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS**

### **PROLOGUE**

#### **Summary**

The reader is introduced to a sailor, a black man named Son, as he is standing on the deck of a ship. He suddenly jumps into the water and tries to swim toward the shore, but the current carries him away. He sees a small craft and climbs aboard it. While crossing the deck, he hears music from below and smells cooked food. He hides in a dark closet and falls asleep. He wakes up on hearing a woman's voice and listens to a part of her conversation with another woman. He realizes that he is the only man on the boat and is reassured by the fact.

The light from the passage allows him to explore the closet where he finds oranges that he can eat. When the boat reaches shore and the women leave, he comes out of the closet and moves below to the galley. He finds something to eat in the refrigerator. After eating and drinking, he goes back to the deck and gazes at the stars and the moon.

#### **Notes**

The novel begins with the words: "He believed he was safe." The gap between belief and reality is highlighted by this man's immediate adventure with the stubborn current of the sea, in which his safety is threatened. 'He' turns out to be one of the main characters in the novel. He has borne many names in his life but the reader will know him as 'Son.' His jump off the ship is an escape of some type but the reader is not sure of what. This man is running from something and wants to be free. He wishes to swim to a deserted pier and does not want to be seen from the shore. These details make the reader wonder about his identity and a cloud of mystery surrounds this man who happens to swim so well.

While swimming, he is suddenly sucked into a whirlpool and the passage that describes his struggle with the current reveals Morrison's excellent imagination. She personifies the current to be a woman who tightens her 'bracelet' around his ankles; who has a 'wet throat' and who has 'the hand of an insistent woman.' The hand finally forces him away from the shore, away from his previous target. His encounter with this watery women foreshadows his subsequent meeting with Jadine, his falling in love with her and the way in which she changes the course of his life. Toni Morrison's style is extremely sinuous here.

It is only when the 'water-lady' removes her hand that he can climb over a smaller craft. The reader realizes that he is a gifted liar when he thinks that: "the sex, weight, the demeanor of whomever he encountered would inform and determine his tale."

The reader later learns that it was Jadine's voice that he had heard while dozing and that it is very different from the 'inviting voice' of his dreams. Later, he falls in love with Jadine but she never really manages to replace the dream he has of a warm, inviting woman at the door of a friendly-looking house. A distinct sense of loneliness surrounds him here that stays with him until the end of the book.

The conversation that the man overhears gives the reader an insight into the nature of the two women involved. While one states that she is never lonely, the other expresses her envy. The curiosity of the reader is naturally aroused about these women who go about in a boat at night.

The prologue ends with these three people having reached the shore of an island that “three hundred years ago, had struck slaves blind the moment they saw it.” The main action of the novel takes place on this island in the Caribbean and the three characters that are briefly introduced in the prologue are later described more vividly. Toni Morrison succeeds in creating a level of suspense by briefly alluding to the interesting traits of these characters and their environment, without giving specific details.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Summary**

The Caribbean Island that the three characters have reached is described in detail in the beginning of this chapter. The plight of the trees, fish and streams when the humans arrive is related. Now the island has houses growing instead of trees and even the pattern of the rains has changed.

One of the houses -- L'Arbe de la Croix -- is outlined in great detail. It is a wonderful house owned by Valerian Street, an American from Philadelphia who is a candy magnate. He had bought it with the intention of staying there after his retirement. It has now been three years since he has retired and his idiosyncrasies are recounted. He is an obsessive gardener and has hydrangeas exported to this island so he can grow them in his greenhouse. He often plays classical music for the benefit of the plants.

The house is compared to a hotel because of its air of people coming and going. The ‘Principal Beauty’ is Margaret, Valerian’s wife. She needs to make trips to Philadelphia, where they have their permanent house, and spends half the year up north. Her husband tries to make her comfortable by hinting that they will finally return there. However, Sydney, one of the black servants who moved down to the island with Mr. Street, thinks otherwise: the greenhouse would have to be burn down to get Valerian out of this island.

An interesting conversation takes place between Sydney and his wife, Ondine, who is the chef of the household about how Valerian passes his time in the greenhouse. Ondine hopes that nothing happens to the greenhouse, so that they may continue to stay there.

Valerian’s eccentricities are related as well as his meeting with the French dentist, Dr. Michelin. After their initial meeting where Valerian was suffering mightily from an abscessed tooth, they have become good friends and occasionally spend time together. They have two things in common: both feel as though they have run out of their homes, Michelin from Algeria, and Street, voluntarily from America, and both have been married twice. The long years of their respective second marriages have not been able to erase the memories of the first. While Michelin had remarried within a year of his divorce, Valerian had stayed a bachelor for a long time. He had seen Margaret on a wintry day at Maine and had instantly wanted to marry her. She is much younger than he is and was the town beauty.

The reader is brought back to the present when Morrison describes Valerian watching his servant pour coffee into his cup. Sydney and Valerian talk about mundane things. When Valerian figures out why his wife has summoned for Sydney, he complains that he doesn’t want any visitors. He then argues playfully with his butler about bunions and corns before asking who intended to come down to the island. On learning that it is his son Michael, Valerian states that he is sure he won’t come.

Margaret now joins them in the greenhouse and begins talking to her husband. She complains about petty things and they discuss food and calories. He teases and scolds Margaret for inviting guests for Christmas. He

reiterates that Michael will not come. An argument follows and Margaret complains that he hates everybody and pays more attention to the dentist Dr. Michelin than his own son. She wants to stay with Michael in America after the holiday but Valerian doesn't think that it is a good idea. Anyway, Valerian wants her to promise that she won't stay with Michael unless he agrees to it.

They then discuss Jadine, Ondine and Sydney's niece who is staying with them for a holiday. Valerian expresses his fears about Ondine and Sydney leaving with Jadine to set up a retail shop and living together. Margaret reassures her husband that the two senior servants will not leave so easily. Margaret once again asks Sydney about the trunk and leaves.

The author now describes the kitchen where Sydney sits at a table. Ondine asks her husband if the mango she sent for Margaret was all right. He responds that she barely ate it. When Sydney tells her that Margaret wants a turkey rather than the usual goose for Christmas, Ondine is angry at the unreasonable demands and doesn't believe that Michael will come. They talk about Michael and Sydney feels that the young man has been spoiled by Margaret and Ondine. Ondine says that no one is spoiled by love and food. She then goes on to show how little she respects Margaret. Sydney, however, tries to defend Margaret.

As they are talking, Jadine enters the kitchen and the aged couple are pleased to see her. She says that she has slept well and late and compares the night air to food. She decides to have pineapple for breakfast. Still insulting Margaret, Ondine calls her a hussy, whereas Sydney says that Valerian always manages to get his way.

Jadine says that she might have to take the boat back to town. Then she asks for a cup of chocolate. Ondine goes to fetch it from the second kitchen that is stocked with supplies. Sydney complains that there is no air-conditioning in the kitchen while Jadine loves the house the way it is. When Ondine comes back, she wonders aloud about a few missing chocolate boxes as well as missing bottled water and several other items. They speculate over who might be the culprit.

Jadine is a beautiful young woman who is a fashion model but now she wants to do something else. Jadine replies that she doesn't want to model and would rather have her own business. Sydney and Ondine express their affection and support for her.

Then the Yardman walks toward the house. The readers learn about the Yardman's visits to the house with a different Mary each time. She ranges from looking about fourteen to twenty-something but she always wears the same hat. Every woman born on the island seems to be called Mary. Yardman does odd jobs around the place while a professional maintenance team comes down twice a year to clean the house properly. Sydney, Ondine and Jadine wonder whether Yardman could have stolen the chocolate. Ondine walks to the door, preparing to recite a list of chores to Yardman. She will have to repeat them three times since he doesn't know how to read or write.

## Notes

This chapter introduces the reader to the Caribbean island of Isle des Chevaliers and its inhabitants including the flora and fauna. Mostly it reveals the dynamics of the Street household and the many occupants' attitudes towards each other. The island's Nature is described in colorful detail by the author as well as personified. The reader sees the invasion of the island from the natural environment's perspective. The conquest of the island was cataclysmic as can be seen in its reaction to the occupation by humans. The river turned into a swamp and the birds and trees were destroyed. The conquering of this island by white men hundreds of years ago is described quite poetically.

*Tar Baby* makes use of myth and legend in both the Caribbean and African-American culture. Morrison sets both the historical and mythical background against which the characters live and react. In the first part of this chapter, the history and geography of the isle (where most of the drama will take place) is recounted. This is the isle that supposedly struck slaves blind the moment they saw it so dazzling was it. This legend is an important part of the story as seen later. Another reason why Toni Morrison includes this description of the island (that is conquered by man) is to introduce the conflict between man and nature in the novel.

The owner of the villa is one of the major characters in the novel: Valerian Street. He is white and eccentric; his idiosyncrasies are odd yet endearing. A person mentioned often as 'Principal Beauty' soon becomes Margaret, Valerian's wife. Valerian is in the greenhouse listening to some classical music when Sydney, the black butler, enters with iced tea. He notices that the liver spots have faded from his employer's hands and that he is becoming "darker" since having moved to the Caribbean. This is the first indication of the close relationship that Valerian shares with his butler.

A unique feature of almost all of Toni Morrison's novels is that there is a constant engaging dance between the present and the past. This is especially true of *Tar Baby* where the present narration is often interspersed with the recounting of past events and thoughts. Here, after Sydney enters the greenhouse and notices the fading liver spots, there is a passage about the hotel-like quality of the house and a recounting of a conversation between Sydney and Ondine that had taken place only six months after they had come to Isle des Chevaliers from Philadelphia. By employing this method, the author succeeds in creating scenes that are closer to reality and do not get monotonous. The readers learn quite a bit about Valerian and his past, his hobbies and his pastimes but much of it is through the eyes of his servants.

The division of labor is shown here to be classified by race. Whereas Margaret and Valerian are allowed to pursue their interests and pastimes, Sydney and Ondine, who may be just as old as them, are seen to be laboring on their behalf. They do not have the option to retire but must continue to work in order to survive. Jadine has designs on setting out on her own to make a fortune and this will provide Sydney and Valerian an opportunity to leave the Street household and live on her largesse.

Sydney and Valerian are friendly and indulge in casual banter. Small yet significant details into characters are given to the reader that will have greater relevance later. Margaret appears to be obsessed with calories and is probably anorexic or at least has an eating disorder. Valerian's suspicion that she drinks secretly prevents him from seeing that she is often bored and that when her son was barely a baby, she would torture him. Later, when Valerian learns the truth, he holds himself guilty of innocence. It then seems to him that it is easier to accept the fact that his wife drank than to know that she hurt their own baby.

In the conversation between Sydney and Valerian, the Street's son Michael is brought up. Though Valerian's son never appears in person in the narrative, a lot about him is learned from the conversations that the others have. It is apparent that Michael is different from other men of his age. He comes across as being a drifter, a man who indulges in a variety of interests according to his whims and fancies. He lives an alternative lifestyle and is involved in environmental politics as well as Native American rights. Valerian is obviously not quite happy with the way his son has turned out to be as he was a successful entrepreneur and probably wants his son to follow his footsteps.

Jadine is mentioned in the conversations in the greenhouse and she makes an appearance toward the end of this chapter. Valerian is scared that she might take Sydney and Ondine along with her when she leaves. However, Margaret reassures him they will not leave. She acts as if they owe the Streets their loyalty. This is a typical reaction that white people have to their servants. It is clear that Valerian is dependent on them in his old age and this is one of the rare occasions when Valerian displays his vulnerability. It is clear that the black couple

love Jadine, their niece, a lot. She comes across as a lively, charming and pretty girl. She has been featured as a model on the cover of a popular magazine and Ondine is proud of her.

In a similar manner, Sydney and Ondine discuss their employers in the kitchen. Ondine is infuriated that she has been asked to make turkey and apple pie for the Christmas dinner instead of the traditional goose dinner. Turkey and apples are difficult to come by in the Caribbean and are not typical foods eaten there. This reveals Margaret's ethnocentrism as she attempts to surround herself with the foods she is used to eating rather than adapt to the new cuisine of her adopted home.

Ondine betrays a deep dislike for Margaret although at one time they were close and the reasons become clear in the later part of the novel. While Ondine believes that Michael does not care much about his mother, Sydney thinks that things are perfectly normal between mother and son. Toni Morrison succeeds in making the reader feel that they have known the characters a long time by the skillful manner in which she depicts their conversations.

The mystery of who is eating the chocolate will come to light in the third chapter when the discovery is made that the Street household is harboring a fugitive, but for now it is a source of humor and mystery as Ondine and Sydney try to figure out who the culprit is.

Thus, the reader is introduced to the principal characters in the first chapter of the novel. Yardman and his Mary are also mentioned in this first chapter. They later play a relevant role in that they become Son's friends and confidantes. The first chapter serves an expository function and the reader now has sufficient information about the characters for the author to develop the plot of the novel. L'Arbe de la Croix and its residents are very vivid in the reader's imagination.....

## OVERALL ANALYSES

### CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Son** - He is an interesting protagonist as he is a man who has a very deep sense of who he is and where he comes from. His culture is important to him and he is sensitive and sentimental. He is the first character that the readers meet in the novel and he engages one's interest immediately. His first action is to jump off his ship and swim toward Queen of France. Therefore, the reader knows he is adventurous.

It is only when he reaches L'Arbe de la Croix that the readers learn more about Son. This is done through his own reflections and his interactions with other people. As he secretly lives in the villa, he becomes enamored with Jadine. He watches her as she sleeps every night and his dearest wish is to imprint his dreams onto hers. Later, he confesses his love for her and the both share a passionate and intimate relationship. His love for her is intense and he looks after her as a child. He supports and adores this woman who has lost her parents at an early age. Their first meeting is brilliantly constructed. He watches her looking at herself in the mirror before saying good morning to her. She is startled and a little scared of him. They start talking and he is.....

**Jadine** - The novel is named for that aspect of hers that Son dislikes, the quality of being a "Tar Baby." He thinks Jadine has sold out to white culture as do many of the other characters in the novel. Jadine is exploring a new way of being black yet she must discover the old ways first before she can create a new identity that defies the stereotypical ones of black women. Son is the sailor who lives by his own rules and Jadine is the.....

**Valerian** - The readers meet him in the first chapter. He is the owner of the beautiful villa of L'Arbe de la Croix. He is a white landowner with a few eccentric qualities: he spends most of his time in the greenhouse, tending to plants and listening to music. He shares a friendly relation with his butler Sydney and he often pulls

his wife's leg. The readers can make out that he is fairly old.

One knows about him when he recalls his past. He had become the owner of the Street Brothers Candy Company that he had inherited it from his family. He had been looked after by his aunts and .....

Additional characters are analyzed in the complete study guide.

## **PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS**

The plot has a traditional structure with one unique quality -- there is a constant transition between the past and the present. There is also a frame story that sets up the protagonist Son as being the catalyst of action and drama in the novel. The events of the novel pivot around him. In the prologue the readers are introduced to him as a man who jumps from his ship and swims toward the pier of Queen of France. Currents make it difficult for him to swim, so he boards a small craft that he sees nearby. The craft goes to a small isle called Isle des Chevaliers and Son goes there as well. The two women on the craft go to a villa on the island called L'Arbe de la Croix and Son reaches it, too. He is thirsty and hungry, so he takes to sneaking into the house for food and water. The first three chapters introduce the characters and their idiosyncrasies, besides.....

## **THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS**

*This story is essentially about conflicts and differing attitudes towards life between blacks and whites, urbanity and nature and men and women. These conflicts are not always obvious but are present beneath the surface. The conflict between blacks and whites is apparent when a quarrel breaks out at the dining table at Christmas. Later, when Jadine wonders what it meant, Son concludes that blacks and whites can work together occasionally but that they must never get together to do private things like eating or sleeping. All of the black characters in the novel voice differing opinions about the relationship between blacks and whites. Some of them refuse to even acknowledge their existence such as Therese while others seem to.....*

## **OTHER ELEMENTS**

### **SYMBOLS / MOTIFS / IMAGERY / SYMBOLISM**

The use of symbolism in the novel serves the purpose of bringing alive the characters as well as the place. Symbolism adds depth and meaning to the scenes while the personification of inanimate objects and places makes for interesting reading that adds a magical quality to the tale. Due to the title of the book, it is difficult to ignore the influence of Afro-American storytelling in this novel. The use of the tar baby tale is threaded throughout the novel and becomes the central trope of the novel as each of the characters must confront their own "tar baby" or psychic trap that prevents them from seeing another perspective that is.....

## **CONTRAST**

Contrast is a technique whereby two characters, events or locations are contrasted to highlight a particular theme. Since much of this novel explores a person's relationship to his or her culture or family, it makes sense that the environment plays an important role in how the characters perceive who they are and how their world view has been shaped. In this novel, urbanity and nature are contrasted to reveal the differing opinions about "blackness." The blind horsemen represent an inability for the human spirit to be.....

## **AUTHOR'S STYLE AND USE OF LANGUAGE**

Toni Morrison has a distinctive writing style. Her inconstant imagination is used to write brilliantly elegant prose. Her language is poetic and she succeeds in creating arresting images. Imagery, symbolism and personification are used often to highlight a theme and makes for vivid reading. What is most effective is.....

## **STUDY QUESTIONS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS**

1. Examine *Tar Baby* as an exploration of the relationships between men and women and blacks and whites. What are the causes of conflict?
2. Examine the use of the folk tale “Tar Baby” in this novel to explore the racial themes in the novel. ....

***END OF SAMPLE MONKEYNOTES EXCERPTS***

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