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Adopting Digital Humanities to Explore Toni Morrison’s Oeuvre: A Literary Dimension

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Abstract

This research paper delves into a new literary dimension of using technology to unravel the rich tapestry of Toni Morrison. It uses digital tools of sentiment analysis, character networks, and text mining to unveil the hidden nuances of her narratives. As her novels are celebrated for their African-American identity, experience, and societal complexities, this study examines the cultural, historical, and emotional landscape of her narratives through the realm of digital humanities. It deepens the understanding of her characters through the geospatial data which traces the cultural, historical, and symbolic dimensions of African Americans. Besides, it offers insights in the integration of technology and literature.

Keywords: Symbolism, Metaphor, Narratives, Character Network, Technology, Identity

The ‘Digital Humanities’ is concerned with the nexus between humanities and computation in the process of learning and research. It is a blending of the digital world with the humanities. In the twenty-first century technology is used in all aspects of life, including education moreover, in this ‘Digital Age’, literary analysis, and reading are possible with the aid of digital tools too. This study sheds light on the analysis of Toni Morrison’s novel through digital tools to analyze the stylistic elements of her text. Though textual analysis can be studied through close reading, certain tools are required to analyze a text and weave the pattern, structure, and stylistics of her writing in digital humanities. It helps to delve deep into the intricate cultural, historical, and social contexts and analyze them. Thus, we study Literature through technology.

The Digital Humanities in the study of Literature confines itself to four domains namely learning outcomes, digital versions of literary texts, hypertexts, and visualization. The knowledge acquired through technology broadens the views of human understanding. Imaginative platforms have also been developed in this field where it visualizes the original text. Research on the use of technology in literature have favoured students and the impact of technology has greater productivity on student’s learning outcome. Thus, this study analyses the tools used for the in-depth analysis of a novel with Toni Morrison’s text as an example.

The Nobel prize-winning Toni Morrison is an American writer who is remarkable for her representation of African Americans. She sheds light on the cultural, historical, and social aspects of them. Moreover, highlights the violence of the black communities through slavery. She has dealt with the recurring themes of race, gender, identity, and oppression of the black communities experienced by herself and also revolves around black women and their roles and strivings for survival in society. She had writer's novels and prose for the literary canon and is considered the most prolific writer in the literary arena. She unearths the culture of African Americans through her fiction.

Beloved, Tar Baby, The Bluest Eye, Mercy, Sula, God Help the Child, and other pieces of her repertoire highlight the themes of women's perception in her writing. She fictionalizes the sexual, racial, and gender identities experienced by the blacks and uses memory as a means to unveil those cultural pasts. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* talks about a young girl who desires beauty on 'Blue Eye' which she considers as a standard of beauty for Westerners. Colonization has also been a fact of such oppression. These ideas of black becoming ugly are succeeded through her own writing of her last novel, *God Help the Child*, which portrays Bride as black but beautiful and a celebrated person. Both the characters Pecola and Bride face consequences in life. Pecola is abused and she finally ends up dying, where Bride faces personal difficulties but finally remains happy. The mother-daughter relationship is also emphasized in her works. She used jazz music which is also a cultural symbol in her works. This study unveils the historical, symbolic, and thematic analysis in reference to their culture in her works through digital tools.

By employing different techniques literary text can be analyzed and this research paper is limited to the tools and examples from the text of Toni Morrison. Text mining, data visualization, topic modeling, network analysis, sentiment analysis, etc. are certain tools that can be used in order to provide an innovative approach on exploring and understanding the text and its characters. 'Text Mining' is a process of analyzing the words, phrases and patterns in an unstructured text. These tools used in this technique shed light on understanding the unstructured meaning of her text and also the underlying patterns of linguistics, narrative structure, and stylistic elements. These text-mining tools help to understand the context of a word or phrase in historical, linguistic, and cultural concerns.

Morrison depicts historical context in her novels with a great deal of insight. Her artistic creation testifies to the nuanced interplay between past and the present by illuminating a long-lasting consequence of racial prejudice, slavery, and the African American experience by exploring the layers of her fiction which deeply highlight the American society and its historical setting. She also explores the nuances of race, gender, and identity in her novel bringing attention to the historical injustices experienced by these unrepresented groups. Her exquisite narrative deftly weaves together the past and the present and enables the readers to understand the long-term effect on people and communities.

Finding hidden historical allusions and linkages in Toni Morrison's writing is made possible by the distinctive and potent method that digital humanities offer. Though the application of computation techniques like 'text mining' and 'network analyses' help in analyzing the complex historical context concealed within her writings. This also spots the intertextual references, allusions, and patterns that the author might intend in the text. Thus, it helps in enhancing our understanding of historical, social, and cultural aspects.

Morrison's novel is much concerned with the historical setting. For instance, in her work, *Beloved*, she examines the lingering impact of slavery on the experience of the African Americans. She illustrates the intricacies of her character's lives and the enduring influence of past events in the current situation by establishing her characters in historical reality. In the novel *Beloved* by Toni

Morrison, the plot was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner who was raped in a slave house in Kentucky. This novel also resembles the same setting and background of the study. This was also adopted as an 'Opera' by Richard Daniel Pour in 2005. The historical backdrop of this story can be understood through these digital tools even without reading the biography of the author and the historical background. The following line tells us so,

"Morrison read a news clipping about Margaret Garner while doing research for another book, and she decided to try to imagine what caused a woman to commit infanticide. What does it mean to be a mother to children who literally belong to another person? What she created was a novel in the tradition of ghost stories, but in which the ghost represents more than just a person returning from the after life. The spirit also stands for the estimated sixty million people who died in the so-called land of the free during the time of enslavement". (Kroger)

Thus, the historical setting and the story is inspired by Margaret Garner. Through the application of digital humanities, a profound background of her stories is achieved, as it analysis the underlying structure and meaning behind them. Though reading her background of writing and biography helps us understand the concept, the digital mode consumes less time by employing such techniques to get output instantly.

Morrison also skillfully uses symbolism and metaphors to provide additional depth and complexity in her writing. She uses a wide variety of literary devices to enrich her tapestry. She uses symbols to represent physical and psychological anguish. These tones can be analysed through 'sentiment analysis' as it sets all emotional tone and help us know beyond our actual understanding. 'Data visualization is another tool that enhances our understanding of themes and motifs visually rather than by reading. This connects our emotions and enriches our knowledge of her works.

The Textual analysis and close reading limit our understanding of the author and their works. But digital humanities keep spotting the connection and patterns of recurring themes. This helps in attaining knowledge of her artistic and thematic concerns. The literary device used by her implies deeper meanings metaphorically. In her novel, *Beloved* she uses Beloved as a ghost and this represents a physical and emotional connection with Sethe. As Sethe devotes herself to her children which is evident in the line "I wouldn't draw breath without my children" (Morrison). The emotions of Sethe and her mother are captured through her stream of consciousness in the novel. Though the physical and textual analysis helps in understanding the symbols, digital humanities offer a 'Sentiment analysis' tool for identifying the emotions of the character. This helps in capturing the tone and 'data visualization' eventually helps in viewing the visual representation of the character which connects more than that of close reading.

Even, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* longs for a blue eye which stands as a physical and psychological representation of the standard beauty. Reading helps us delve into the imagination of the character whereas, network analysis and digital visualization represent the characters visually and remain as a mark for further analysis. Thus, these tools provide numerous dimensions of a text by analysing and examining the text.

Digital humanities further offer a dynamic and inventive method of delving into her complex narrative techniques. She uses a fragmented narrative and a storytelling mode which can be analysed through computation tools like word frequencies, character networks, and narratives. These tools help in understanding distinctive story telling strategies. Furthermore, the use of narrative devices like stream of consciousness, and non-linear storytelling in multiple perspectives are analysed. There is a sense of fragmentation and disorientation in her characters. These narratives represent her richness and complexity of writing and the digital approach concerns a deeper understanding of the complexity and cultural significance of her literary contribution. Thus, these tools help in revealing the unknown facts of her writing.

Morrison illustrates the complex and fluid nature of identity within the racial and cultural setting. She highlights the multifaceted identities and these identities are analyzed through ‘network analysis’ which virtualizes the characters and their interaction. This spots the identity, race, and gender of a character by shedding light on the societal structure and power dynamic. This also connects the characters with their inclined identity and further analyzes it in a literary dimension. She is analyzed as a modern writer who examines issues concerning social, cultural, and historical context. Her significance in highlighting memory and history remains as a bridge between the past and the present in her works. As ‘network analysis’ helps in understanding the complex and structured systems, here in *Beloved*, Sethe and her identity as a slave, mother, wife, daughter-in-law, and African-American are represented with the connection with other characters in the novel. Complex characters in novels can be analyzed using these digital tools.

In conclusion, the study of digital humanities has created new opportunities for analysis of the literary text of Morrison. This study helps in understanding the socio-cultural, historical, and narrative strategies through text mining, data visualization, and network analysis. It offers an understanding of Morrison’s text through the African-American culture. This has also improved the concerns in narrative strategies, character development, and thematic concerns with the application of digital tools. Though close reading reveals all the nuances of her writing, digital toolshelp to weave her historical, cultural and symbolic representations together to create a unique voice for her writing and enrich her literary canon.

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