



## Legal Criminality in the Works of Toni Morrison: A Quantitative and Longitudinal Analysis

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### Abstract

*The works of Toni Morrison have been investigated, analyzed, and researched for many thematic elements. Yet there remains a startling lack of scholarly analysis regarding the issues of crime and law enforcement within her works, apart from Beloved. Specifically, this project analyzes the use of crime and criminal activity throughout several of Toni Morrison's books including The Bluest Eye, Love, and Jazz, taking careful note of the uses, surrounding passages, and context of these references. The books have been coded utilizing a quantitative overview, keeping in mind the qualitative approach to ensure accuracy as well as correct interpretations. Specific operational definitions have been given to the variations in crime, derived by current legal standards and widely accepted uses. Morrison's uses of crime and law enforcement in her books suggest an absence of law enforcement involvement in the communities within the novel. In The Bluest Eye, the data showed African American women and children as the leading victim demographic, typically victimized by African American male adults, with whites being conspicuously absent. These trends are similar among her later books but with some longitudinal differences.*

## Introduction

Research methods among academic disciplines have often been segregated to reside within specific disciplines. Recent trends have shown many benefits of teaching undergraduate students multidisciplinary research methods (Lekhi et al., 2017). However, there are still a number of challenges with integrating these methods into the curriculum of academic disciplines. For some students in more traditional humanities or non-science-based disciplines, there can be difficulties integrating the quantitative content into the context of their discipline due to the lack of a systematic, accepted method structure (Frith, 2012). Clearly a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodology is needed for students to gain a holistic picture of the research at hand. This duality of research methods and interpretation is vital to this understanding. To explain both the findings and their underlying causal factors (at least using the critical realist ontological framework), the empirical, actual, and real levels must be taken in whole to gain a proper understanding of the causal relationship and avoid the errors of solely empirical research (Fletcher, 2017).

In recent literature, “machine methods” of analyzing literature from a quantitative perspective (including “distant reading”) have been hotly debated. Some scholars have argued that these methods are incompatible with the goals of the humanities, while others have argued that the development of these methods would reduce the gap that is currently under-theorized (Long & So, 2016). Additionally, bridging this gap seems to be of key importance to many quantitative researchers. By utilizing proper scientific methods and paying close attention to the discrepancies between theory and data, this gap can be properly realized and addressed (Carter & Hurtado, 2007). The factors surrounding a specific research project must be taken into consideration when deciding on the model (and consequently the method) of interdisciplinary research that is used, whether it be centralist, pluralist, integrationist, or some combination of the three (Chilton & Wodak, 2005).

## Victims and Criminals

Many of Morrison’s works share the common thread of what she defines in *Tar Baby* as “the crime of innocence” (Morrison, 1981, p. 242). In *The Bluest Eye*, this is shown through the rape of Pecola, the death of her illegitimate child, and her eventual descent into madness (Morrison, 1970) (Otten, 1989, p. 9). In *Love*, it can be seen through the larger narrative of the infighting between Heed and Christine and the trauma that caused them to grow apart (Morrison 2003). In *Jazz*, the brutal murder of Dorcas and the blame that is assigned to her are indicative of this “crime of innocence” (Morrison, 1992). In *Song of Solomon*, this is further emphasized through the lens of a more materialistic worldview, which is shown through Milkman Dead (Morrison, 1977) (Otten, 1989, pp. 45–46). The implicit preference against “those at the bottom” reinforces the self-hatred

faced by those who experience it, which disproportionately affects those who face intersectional levels of discrimination, such as those in the minority of race, age, and gender. Each of Morrison's books illustrates this very clearly with different focuses from each book.

It is important to note that those who face such discrimination are not powerless against it; in many circumstances, their resistance is made stronger by the oppression they have overcome. In many cases, the physical or emotional oppression faced by these individuals (and in particular, female African American children), use their experience to find unique ways of avoiding further victimization and oppression (Putnam, 2011).

*The Bluest Eye* highlights this stark oppression in terms of both race and age. Throughout the book, Morrison alludes to the societal views regarding race, illustrated through the adults' preference for the white children's doll. At one point, the doll is broken by Claudia, a signal in defiance of the automatic preferences and social norms given to the white doll and against her own non-white "ugliness". Additionally, the sexual violence against Freida, and especially Pecola, indicate a tremendous power difference and the clear abuse of that power difference (Ansarey, 2017).

*Jazz* shows the larger narrative differences of gender very clearly. While in all the novels, the victim status of women is emphasized, the details in *Jazz* show this through multiple powerful avenues. In particular, the victimization of women is shown through a societal lens of criticism and objectification (Byerman, 2005, pp. 76–77). Never is this more clear than in the final scenes, in which Felice puts the blame of Dorcas's death not on Joe Trace, but on Dorcas herself. This clear example of victim-blaming by someone of the same demographic as the victim, clearly shows the upward battle faced by those who are disproportionately discriminated against.

*Love* does an excellent job of showing the intersection of gender, race, and age in victimhood. In an attempt to overcome their trauma, both Heed and Christine fight each other, rather than placing the blame on the one person who is responsible: Bill Cosey. As they face their traumatic pasts and begin to clearly reflect on the events that have occurred, rather than placing the blame on one another, they are able to move beyond their past resentments and hatred for one another (Harack, 2013).

## The Larger Narrative

This absence of law (and in particular, law enforcement) to the service of African Americans is not immediately obvious to most readers throughout many of Morrison's books. However, much of the larger picture hints at exactly this absence. Even the title of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is a subtle nod to "The Doll Test" used as a legal defense in *Brown vs. Board of Education* (Greenhouse, 2008, p. 86). In fact, there is clear evidence that these feelings regarding the inequity of law are widespread throughout American Literature with

many authors such as Douglass, Sumner, or Emerson making similar arguments. Many found the existence of slavery and race domination to be evidence that power itself creates and enforces the laws of a society, not any higher ideal of justice or conscience (Crane, 2002).

Throughout the late 19th to early 20th century, the justice system in America was continually viewed as a means to reinforce the injustice that continued out of desegregation and into the Jim Crow era (Milewski, 2018). This racial injustice has continued into modern times with the increase in disproportionate incarceration based on race, a further manipulation of the justice system as a reinforcement of legal inequity (Alexander, 2010).

## Methodology

This study utilizes a unique combination of distant and critical reading, combined with various methods of analysis from the social sciences (Moretti, 2013). To begin, a group of three to five coders (varied by book), including myself, read through each of the three novels by Morrison and manually coded them for a variety of factors. The overall factors that were coded for fit under a couple separate research categories: micro-aggressions, property issues, legal references, and as referenced in this piece, criminal acts. These factors were included with the page number, character, and a quote of the sentence or phrase where the reference was from. After each of the books was coded, the criminal acts were taken out separately and coded further for information related to crime type, perpetrator demographics (race, age, and gender), and victim demographics (race, age, and gender).

The results were then inputted into a data set that categorized each trait (crime type, perpetrator race, perpetrator age, perpetrator gender, victim race, victim age, and victim gender) by numerical value. Using IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the results were analyzed and descriptive statistics (and appropriate graphs) were calculated. The data sets are being kept for future study to examine the inferential statistics over the course of Morrison's total works, once all of her novels and writings are appropriately coded.

## Results

The results indicated a number of significant results regarding the works and use of actionable crime in all three of Morrison's novels. The first is the distribution of crime types throughout all three of Morrison's novels (Figure 1). The leading five categories were significantly higher than the other crime categories: with 35 references of battery, 26 references of theft, 25 references of murder, 23 references of assault, and 20 references of rape out of a total of 254 total crime references.

Additionally, there were several significant results regarding the victim demographics throughout all three of Morrison's novels. The age of the victims

showed 114 instances in which children were the victims, 88 instances with adults as the victims, 40 instances with a victim of general or unknown age, 8 instances where there were victims from multiple demographic categories, and 4 instances with animals as the victims (Figure 2). The gender of the victims showed 144 instances in which women were the victims, 59 instances in which men were the victims, 33 instances with a victim of general or unknown gender, 14 instances where there were victims from multiple demographic categories, and four instances with animals as the victims (gender unknown) (Figure 3). Additionally, the race of the victims showed 178 instances in which African Americans were the victims, 50 instances with a victim of general or unknown race, 16 instances in which Caucasians were the victims, six instances in which there were victims from multiple demographic categories, and four instances with animals as the victims (Figure 4).

There were also several significant results regarding the perpetrator demographics in all three of Morrison's novels. The age of the perpetrators showed 185 instances in which adults were the perpetrators, 43 instances in which children were the perpetrators, 22 instances with a perpetrator of general or unknown age, and four instances with perpetrators from multiple demographic categories (Figure 5). The gender of the perpetrators showed 132 instances in which males were the perpetrators, 98 instances in which females were the perpetrators, 18 instances with a perpetrator of general or unknown gender, and five instances with perpetrators from multiple demographic categories (Figure 6). The race of the perpetrators showed 200 instances in which African Americans were the perpetrators, 29 instances with a perpetrator of general or unknown race, 18 instances in which Caucasians were the perpetrators, and six instances with perpetrators from multiple demographic categories (Figure 7).

The last area of interest examines the longitudinal timeline of Morrison's writing, tracking the crime type changes over time. The results show consistent references to assault with a dip during 1992 (*Jazz*) (Figure 8). Additionally, references to battery remained consistent throughout all three books. Conversely, references to murder were significant throughout *Jazz* but were almost unheard of in the other two books. Similar to that, references to rape were prevalent in *The Bluest Eye* but remained low in the other two books. Lastly, references to child abuse started off significant, while also growing throughout Morrison's career as a writer.

## Discussion

Altogether, the results provide significant quantitative insight into the crime makeup of Morrison's novels, including the demographics of the characters involved in those crimes. The "crime of innocence" mentioned earlier seems to be supported, as most of the victims are in the "minority" of their demographic status. Additionally, the results highlight and further accentuate the themes of victimhood and intersectionality that are shown throughout Morrison's works.

There were several areas that could be revised for future consideration. The first of note is the potential error that is brought about using non-experimental research and descriptive statistics. While acceptable for the purposes of this research, future research would benefit from further exploration into experimental manipulations and use of inferential data analysis methods. Additionally, there is the potential for interpretative errors in the coding. While the use of multiple raters was utilized to minimize this impact, this potential will always exist when there is room for subjective interpretations.

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## Figures

Count of Crime:

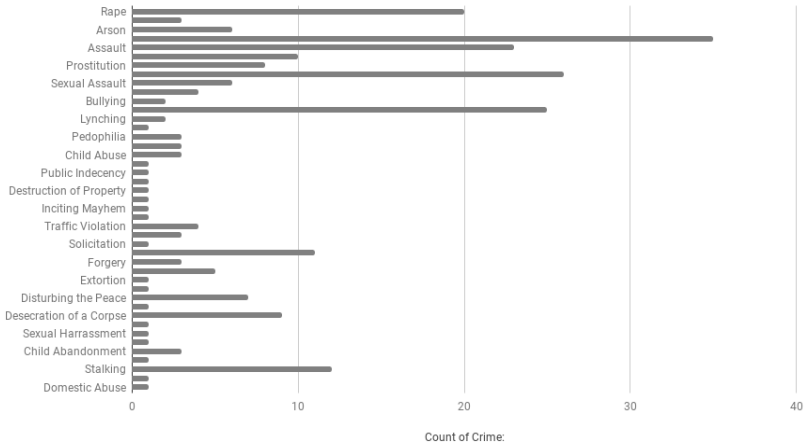


Figure 1. Pie chart of crime type for all three of Morrison's novels.

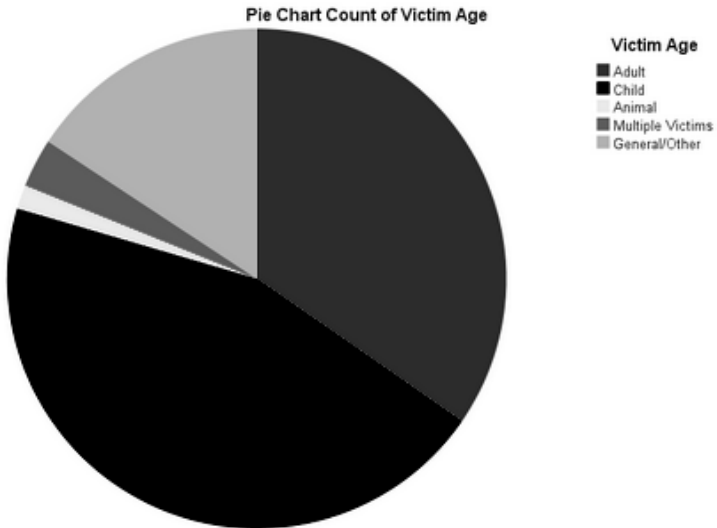


Figure 2. Pie chart of victim age for all three of Morrison's novels.



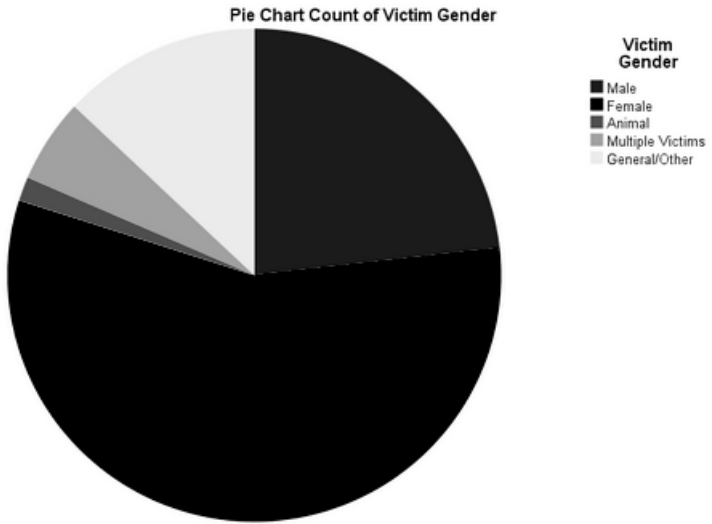


Figure 3. Pie chart of victim gender for all three of Morrison's novels.

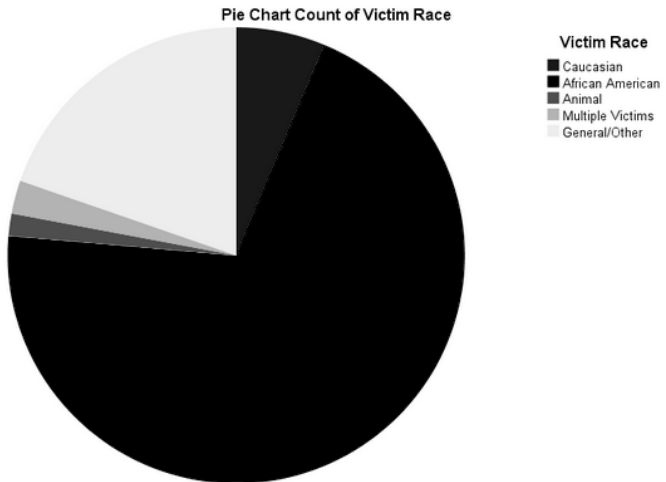


Figure 4. Pie chart of victim race for all three of Morrison's novels.

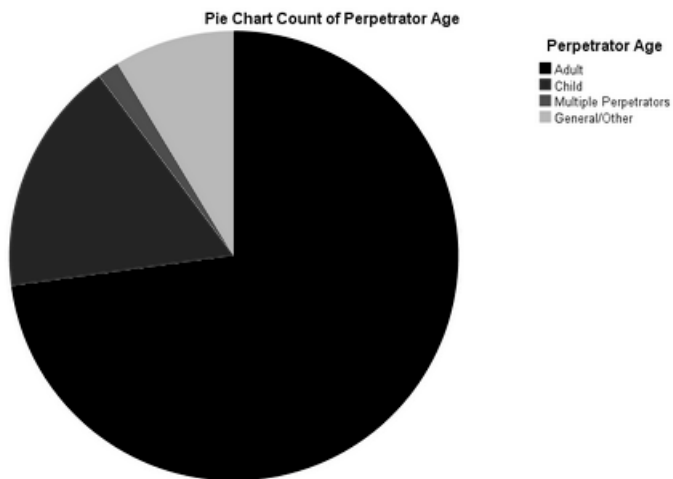


Figure 5. Pie chart of perpetrator age for all three of Morrison's novels.

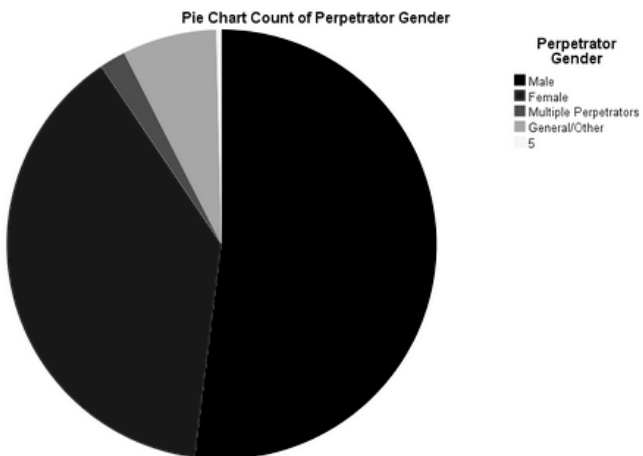


Figure 6. Pie chart of perpetrator gender for all three of Morrison's novels.

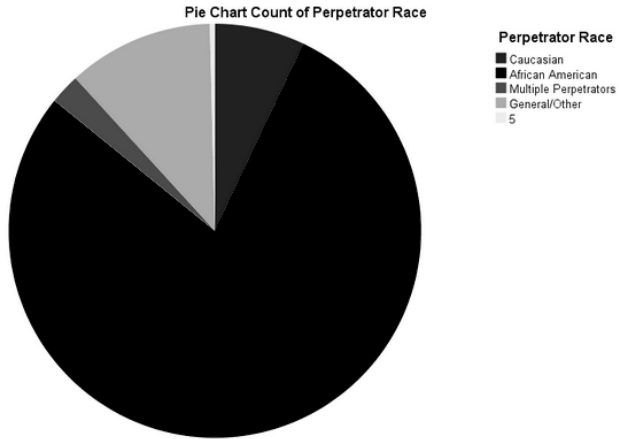


Figure 7. Pie chart of perpetrator race for all three of Morrison's novels.

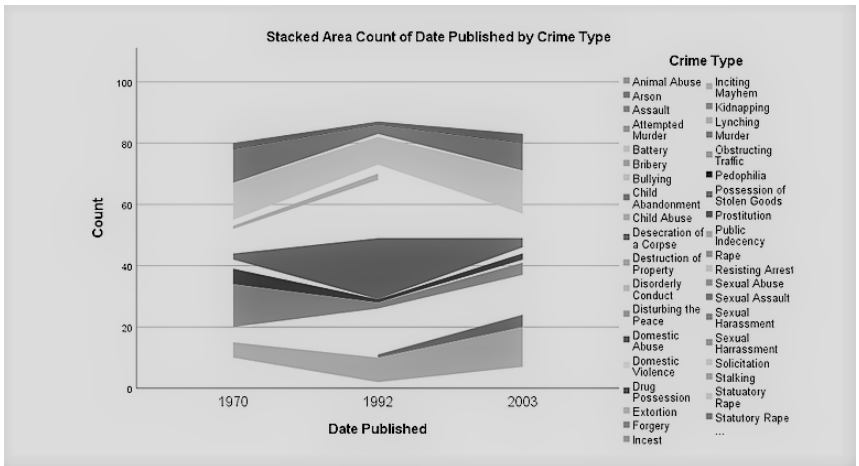


Figure 8. Longitudinal graph of crime type across all three of Morrison's novels.

