



# Confucian Idea of “Unity of Heaven and Human” in *Paradise*

Bei Zhang

Department of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, Zhejiang, China.

**How to cite this paper:** Bei Zhang. (2024) Confucian Idea of “Unity of Heaven and Human” in *Paradise*. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 8(3), 629-637. DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2024.03.014

**Received:** February 24, 2024

**Accepted:** March 21, 2024

**Published:** April 19, 2024

\***Corresponding author:** Bei Zhang, Department of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, Zhejiang, China.

## Abstract

Toni Morrison, the first contemporary African-American female writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, explores the trauma endured by African Americans through the prisms of race, culture, and society in her literary works. She dissects the causes of their physical and psychological traumas in a society dominated by white people. By depicting the experiences and fates of her characters, Morrison clarifies the imperative need for humans to maintain harmonious connections with nature, others, and their own inner selves. Morrison thoroughly examines effective methods to achieve harmony between humans and nature, society, and the self. The Confucian idea of “Unity of Heaven and Human” also explores the bond between Heaven and humans, focusing on the relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and humans with their inner selves. This paper aims to analyze the embodiment of Confucian thought in *Paradise* and present a new perspective for understanding and studying this novel.

## Keywords

Toni Morrison, *Paradise*, Confucian, “Unity of Heaven and Human”

## 1. Introduction

*Paradise*, published in 1998, is an adaptation of a story Toni Morrison heard during her trip to Brazil in the 1980s. The novel is set in 1950s America, with a focus on two distinct locations in Oklahoma: the town of Ruby, inhabited by the African-American community, and a Catholic Convent. Residents of Ruby enforce a strict exclusion of those not of pure African descent, leading a secluded life. Later, the alliance between the Convent women and the women of Ruby poses a significant threat to the patriarchal authority of the men in Ruby's town. In response to this threat, the men rush into the Convent and kill five women ruthlessly.

In contrast to Morrison's earlier novels, which focus on the theme of black oppression by white culture and the struggle for identity in a predominantly white society, *Paradise* shifts its focus to the internal conflict and contradictions within black communities. The novel articulates Morrison's dissent against radical black nationalism and her profound contemplation on the perpetuation and evolution of black cultural identity.

*Paradise* has sparked diverse evaluations and studies within the international academic community since its publication. Some scholars have scrutinized its characters from the angles of race and feminism, while others have focused on the portrayal of living space for the black community. Additionally, there have been analyses of its narrative techniques and strategies employed, as well as examinations from a perspective of new historicism. However, there remains a notable gap in research on the depiction of Confucian ideology within this novel.

The concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” (*tianren heyi* 天人合一) in Confucianism has evolved through

various stages of development. Its roots can be traced back to the *Book of Changes*<sup>1</sup> and was later endorsed by Confucius<sup>2</sup>, along with other Confucian thinkers like Mencius<sup>3</sup> and Xunzi<sup>4</sup>, who not only inherited but also extended it into a comprehensive philosophy with profound ideological implications. The primary objective of the “Unity of Heaven and Human” concept is to investigate the interconnection between Heaven, Earth, and humans, aiming to establish a state of harmonious coexistence among them. This paper aims to analyze the embodiment of the concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” in *Paradise* by examining three relationships: harmony between humans and nature, harmony between humans and society, and harmony with the inner self.

## 2. Relationship between Human and Nature in the Novel

The concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” in ancient Chinese philosophy views Heaven, Man, and Nature as interconnected and interdependent, forming an organic unity. This concept suggests a model of natural generation that emphasizes the harmony between human beings and the natural world. According to this belief, *qi* (vital force) or *yuan qi* (primordial vital force), flows through the universe, originating from Heaven and Earth, and actively contributes to the creation and development of all things, thereby shaping the entire world. As stated in the *Book of Changes*,

There is Heaven and Earth then there is everything, there is everything then there is man and woman, there are man and woman then there is a couple, there is a couple then there is father and son. (*Book of Changes*, 1999, p. 8)

The concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” delves into the interconnectedness between humans and nature, asserting that they rely on each other and cannot be separated within the cosmos. In contrast to Western anthropocentrism, this belief system emphasizes the close bond between humans and nature, advocating for the mutual love and respect of all entities in the natural world in order to attain harmony. Confucian Scholar Zhang Zai describes the relationship between humans and nature as follows,

Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions. (Zhang, 2009: 58)

He asserts that the interconnection between humans and the natural world is rooted in mutual respect. Humans depend on nature for resources and energy necessary for the advancement of society. It is essential for humans to honor and safeguard nature while adhering to its inherent principles. Zhang Zai contends that nature also offers spiritual solace, sustenance, and ethical refinement to humans. All elements in the natural world, including human beings, are interconnected and interdependent. Given that humans are a part of the natural world, any harm inflicted upon nature ultimately affects human beings as well.

Nature plays a crucial role in Morrison’s works, serving as an indispensable element in her novelistic creation. Barbara Christian in her “Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison” states as follows,

[t]he interpretation of Nature is not only central to her characters’ attempts to understand themselves but

<sup>1</sup> *Book of Changes Yijing* 易經, is an ancient Chinese divination text and among the oldest of the Chinese classics. With more than two and a half millennia’s worth of commentary and interpretation, it is an influential text read throughout the world, providing inspiration to the worlds of religion, philosophy, literature and art. Originally a divination manual in the Western Zhou period (1000-750 BC), over the course of the Warring States period and early imperial period (500-200 BC), after becoming part of the Five Classics in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC, *Book of Changes* was the subject of scholarly commentary and the basis for divination practice for centuries across the Far East, and eventually took on an influential role in Western understanding of Eastern thought.

<sup>2</sup> Confucius *Kǒng Fūzǐ* 孔夫子 (551-479 BC), was a Chinese philosopher and politician of the Spring and Autumn period. The philosophy of Confucius, also known as Confucianism, emphasized personal and governmental morality, correctness of social relationships, justice, kindness, and sincerity.

<sup>3</sup> Mencius *Mengzi* 孟子 (372–289 BC or 385–303 or 302 BC) was a Chinese Confucian philosopher who has often been described as the “second Sage”, that is, after only Confucius himself. He is part of Confucius’s fourth generation of disciples. Mencius inherited Confucius’s thinking and developed it further. Living during the Warring States period, he is said to have spent much of his life travelling around China offering counsel to different rulers. Conversations with these rulers form the basis of the *Mencius*, which would later be canonized as a Confucian classic.

<sup>4</sup> Xunzi 荀子 (310-235 BC OR 314-217 BC), was a Chinese Confucian philosopher and writer who lived during the Warring States period. A book known as the *Xunzi* is traditionally attributed to him. His works survive in an excellent condition, and were a major influence in forming the official state doctrines of the Han dynasty.

to the fables Morrison weaves, the way she tells her tales. The return to black culture and the importance of nature are important themes in Morrison's novels. The understanding of nature not only enables people to know themselves but also facilitates Morrison to narrate plots. Toni Morrison endows nature in her novels with so important a significance that few persons, among the contemporary American novelists, do like her on that. (Christian, 1980, p. 75)

Morrison insists that humans and nature can understand each other and maintain a harmonious relationship. In her view, nature is not only the spatial environment of human life but also the sacred spiritual home of human beings. Humans should love nature, integrate into nature, and seek inner peace under the care and influence of nature.

In *Paradise*, the relationship between humans and nature is fully portrayed through two types of characters. One is represented by the residents of Ruby Town, led by Steward Morgan, who has been completely assimilated by the values of "anthropocentrism" advocated by industrialized society. The other type is represented by the Convent women, with Abbess Consolata as their leader, who maintain the most primitive and simple way of life, living in harmony with nature.

Morrison illustrates the deteriorating relationship between humans and nature in Ruby Town. The traditional farming practices that once bound African Americans to nature are fading in the economically developed northern cities. The booming population growth due to industrialization and unsustainable land use have disrupted the harmony between humans and nature. The residents of Ruby Town have become wealthy by selling their land to various companies and now have access to the same technological products as the white people, "In every Ruby household appliances pumped, hummed, sucked, purred, whispered and flowed" (*Paradise*, p. 89). These well-designed household appliances, fancy clothes, and luxury cars, previously exclusive to the white community, are now part of the daily lives of African Americans. The people of Ruby Town have fully embraced commercial culture, leading to the loss of their connection with nature. Wealth has become the driving force, with individuals like Steward Morgan viewing land as a commodity for profit, "in 1962 the natural gas drilled to ten thousand feet on the ranch filled his pockets but shrunk their land to a toy ranch, and they lost the trees that had made it so beautiful to hold" (p. 82). The pursuit of wealth through industrialization has caused the once harmonious relationship with nature to deteriorate, posing a threat to human survival.

Unlike Morrison's other novels, *Paradise* barely depicts natural landscapes. Instead, Morrison vividly reveals human destruction of nature by describing the townspeople of Ruby's greed-driven exploitation of natural resources under the guise of modern industrialization. The call for a return to nature is an important theme in *Paradise*. As a writer concerned with nature conservation and sustainable development, Morrison indicates in *Paradise* that humans are exploiters of natural resources and direct destroyers.

In this novel, Morgan undergoes a transformation from a kind person to a cruel and ruthless individual. This shift is attributed partly to the assimilation of values influenced by white culture and industrialization, and also to his disharmonious relationship with nature, preventing him from becoming a person with love and responsibility. It is evident that, in the process of an individual's development of a complete personality, Morrison places nature in a particularly significant position. If a person loses harmony with nature, their values and life will be distorted by the industrialized values. Therefore, Morrison advocates in the novel that humans should learn to live in harmony with nature, gain support and strength from nature, and become psychologically healthy individuals.

Confucian scholar Meng Pei-yuan believes that the fundamental difference between Confucianism and anthropocentrism lies in the former's emphasis on human value while the latter focuses on interests. Meng Pei-yuan explains that the reason why humans are the most noble creatures between heaven and earth is because of their ability to live in harmony with nature. Just as he has argued,

Humans are the noblest because they realize their nature by accomplishing the heavenly mission and completing the way of production and reproduction in the natural world so that everything follows and enjoys its natural course of life. It is from the harmony between humans and nature that humans derive their greatest joy and happiness. (Meng, 2007, p. 10)

In contrast to the people of Ruby, the Convent women live in harmony with nature. When the men from Ruby rushed into the Convent, they found that "Each woman sleeps not in a bed, like normal people, but in a hammock. Other than that, and except for a narrow desk and an end table, there is no additional furniture" (p. 8). The Convent is "surrounded by corn, buffalo grass, clover and approached by a dirt track barely seen from the road. The mansion-

turned-Convent was there long before the town appeared.” (p. 11) The Convent women maintain the simplest way of life, much like living in the wild. Additionally, they sustain themselves through their own efforts and provide food for the residents of Ruby. They also offer shelter and refuge for those in need, providing spiritual comfort and guidance to those who have experienced trauma, regardless of their race or gender, just as nature provides healing for humans. The novel provides a detailed description of the healing power of nature,

Gathered in the kitchen door, first, they watched; then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion fingers so they entered it and let it pour like a balm on their shaved hands and upturned faces...If there were any recollections of a recent warning or intimation of harm, the irresistible rain washed them away. (p. 283)

The women of the Convent in the novel, represented by Consolata, find solace and healing in nature. They embrace the outdoors, and their suffering is washed away by the rain, which seems to have a certain magic that can heal their sadness and pain. In that moment, they achieve true freedom and become genuinely liberated individuals. The power and comfort they derive from nature enrich and satisfy their inner being, contributing to their physical and mental well-being. Similarly, Confucius believed that humans can derive spiritual guidance and strength from nature, as expressed in the quote “The wise delight in water; the humane delight in mountains.” (*Analects*, 2014, p. 128) this means that the wise are attracted to rivers or streams because they embody qualities such as the impulse of life, forward momentum, clarity, purity, and unfathomable depth. Meanwhile, those with compassion connect deeply with mountains, finding a sense of belonging and stability in them. The natural world’s mountains and waters bestow great spiritual power upon humanity, highlighting the intimate connection between humans and nature. The women of the Convent lead a simple, natural way of life, fostering harmonious coexistence with nature.

Morrison, in *Paradise*, portrays two distinct characters and their harmonious and disharmonious relationships with nature. The residents of Ruby Town demonstrate human destruction and arbitrary control of nature, as well as their alienation from it. The simple and close-to-nature lifestyle of the Convent women showcases human’s ability to coexist harmoniously with nature, drawing spiritual strength and support from it to achieve self-growth and spiritual completeness. Nature holds an important position in Morrison’s novels. Clearly, Morrison and the concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” both underscore the importance of nature in meeting human material needs and spiritual growth. Therefore, humans should protect nature and peacefully coexist with it to achieve a sustainable society.

### 3. Relationship between Human and Society in the Novel

The “Unity of Heaven and Human” emphasizes the importance of handling social relationships with human nature and morality. People of different races, cultures, and genders should all have a heart of “benevolence” (*ren* 仁) towards others. *Ren* reflects mutual respect and care between people. As Mencius said, “He who is benevolent loves others, and he who has manners respects others. He who loves others is loved by others and he who respects others is respected by others” (*Mencius*, 1992, p. 57). Mencius stated that being benevolent and having manners lead to being loved and respected by others. Confucianism advocates for observing and empathizing with the suffering of others, taking *Ren* as a basic moral principle to establish a harmonious society.

Morrison also promotes the establishment of harmonious and stable relationships with others, seeking support and strength in society to construct self-identity. No one can live in isolation in society and needs to interact with others. Morrison astutely observes the lives of African Americans, portraying various social relationships in her works, including relationships between white people and African Americans, within the African American community, and between individuals and the community. Through exploring these relationships, Morrison aims to call for the elimination of various forms of discrimination and the establishment of harmonious social relationships as advocated by Confucianism.

In *Paradise*, Morrison examines the discrimination within the African American community during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when many migrated from the South to Northern cities. Some light-skinned African Americans, after achieving middle-class status, began to exhibit a sense of superiority towards their dark-skinned counterparts, leading to internal discrimination and a breakdown of mutual love and connections within the community. This transformed what was once a spiritual home of comfort and strength into a place filled with discrimination. Ruby Town is an isolated, closed-off black community that separates itself from the outside world to avoid the infringement of the white society. However, years later, this black community begins to disintegrate from within,

The collapse of Ruby does not lie in the intrusion from the whites or the Convent, but from people's incompatible conflicts within their community, by reversing the racism they used to suffer from and making it a new tournament to those light-skinned people, which is a clumsy imitation of the society they have escaped. (Hilfrich, 2006, p. 331)

The people of Ruby Town believe that pure black-skinned individuals are superior, and those with lighter skin are deemed inferior because they are descendants of the past white population. Fearing the contamination of their pure lineage, they began practicing endogamy within pure black-skinned families. As per this rule, dark-skinned individuals are not allowed to marry those with lighter skin. Roger Beast, a native of Ruby Town, was the first to violate this rule, marrying a lighter-skinned black woman. He faced violent opposition from the other black residents of the town. Roger's grandfather had endured great hardships to establish and prosper Ruby Town in Oklahoma. However, due to Roger's marriage, his grandfather's name was erased from the list of the town's nine founders and deemed as "the one nobody admitted existed" (p. 195). Roger was forced to do the most menial and hardest jobs in Ruby Town, isolated by the community. When his wife faced childbirth complications, the townspeople, especially the men, refused to provide aid, leading to the tragic loss of his wife and unborn child. Roger's family was scorned by the other black residents, and the town's bankers, Deacon and Steward, rejected his loan request to establish his own business. Consequently, he had to seek work outside of the town.

Roger's daughter Patricia and granddaughter Billy also experienced discrimination from other black community members in Ruby. Against her wishes, Patricia married a dark-skinned black man hoping that her child would receive fair treatment due to their darker skin. Unfortunately, her daughter was born with a light skin color similar to her own. Adding to her tragedy, her husband passed away early, exacerbating her difficult life. It wasn't until Patricia planned to write a Ruby Town genealogy collection to please the townspeople that she realized that they judged her based on her skin color rather than her character. Patricia confided in her father, stating, "Daddy, they don't hate us because Mama was your first customer. They hated us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me. Well, you can see the problems with blood rules." (p. 196) Furthermore, other black community members directed abusive language at her two-year-old daughter, Billy, calling her a loose girl. However, when Jeff's "purebred" daughter Annette, at the age of 14, had a sexual relationship with K.D., the entire town supported her solely because she was a black girl, "Skin color trumps morality and becomes the only criterion to judge people in Ruby" (Zhao, 2011, p. 157). In this black community, people often judge others based on skin color rather than inner virtues. The harsh words made Patricia a stern mother, causing her to constantly hit Billy, greatly damaging their mother-daughter relationship.

In conclusion, similar to discrimination from white people, discrimination and conflicts among black people also have a negative impact on their lives. If they are unwilling to change the paternalistic dominance towards others, and cease using skin color as the primary criteria for judgment, then this small town will undoubtedly move towards disintegration. Just as the missionary said,

Finally, they think they have outfoxed the Whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause.... Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby was an unnecessary failure. (p. 306)

Morrison has identified the internal issues within the black community, such as extreme arrogance, male dominance, and so on, which are detrimental to the development and harmony within the black community. When discussing *Paradise*, Morrison believes that they have constructed a secluded paternalistic society in Ruby Town based on the teachings of Christianity.

The concept of "Unity of Heaven and Human" believes that an individual cannot separate from social relationships, and Morrison also expressed deep concern for the social relationships between people. The distorted and disharmonious relationships between individuals in the novel lead to the incompleteness of identity. In order to construct self-identity, individuals must interact with others to build their own identity. One needs to maintain harmonious relationships with others in society to achieve the meaning of life, gain spiritual growth, and become a complete person. Both the "Unity of Heaven and Human" and Morrison emphasize the importance of maintaining harmonious relationships with others in society.

#### 4. Relationship between Human and Self in the Novel

The relationship between individuals and their inner selves is the third aspect of the “Unity of Heaven and Human”. It is the highest goal of life pursued by Confucian scholars for thousands of years, aiming to achieve a harmonious relationship with one’s inner self. Confucianism believes that individuals need to maintain a harmonious relationship with their inner selves in order to achieve complete self-identity, which refers to an individual’s affirmation of their own existence. Jacqueline Weever once said, “The struggle to establish identity in a world which does not acknowledge one’s existence is sometimes lost” (Jacqueline de Weever, 1979, p. 403). Therefore, self-identity is a prerequisite for becoming a complete person. The concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” proposes that individuals need to restrain their desires, guide their behavior with morality and virtue in society, and handle the relationship between spirit and body. Pre-Qin<sup>5</sup> Confucian scholars believed that people’s moral qualities come from heaven. In the process of constructing self-identity, “Unity of Heaven and Human” places great importance on self-love and self-worth. Therefore, the basic requirement for individuals to achieve harmony with their inner selves is to possess morality and virtue and awareness of self-love and self-worth.

African Americans have long been troubled by the identity crisis, Morrison examines “how the ideologies perpetuated by the dominant groups and adopted by the marginal groups influence the identity of the blacks, especially women.” (Chinyere, 2022, p. 186) In her novels, “Morrison highlights the importance of identity, the formation of the ‘self’, and the influence of the environment and society on that development.” (Tamilselvi & Prabha, 2016, p. 80) Morrison not only delineates their spiritual destitution but also delves into the methods of constructing self-identity, particularly through embodying moral virtues. These serve as fundamental standards and social norms that guide human thoughts and actions. Alongside morals and virtues, recognizing self-love and self-worth are also indispensable in building self-identity. The concept of “Unity of Heaven and Human” and Morrison both underscore the necessity of harmony between individuals and their inner selves in the construction of self-identity.

A person with strong morals and virtues can control their actions and thoughts to achieve harmony with their inner self. Conversely, someone lacking in morals will inevitably engage in harmful actions that affect their own and other’s identities. A notable example in the novel is the Morgan brothers. As members of a marginalized ethnic group, they felt a heightened sense of inferiority, leading to inner discord. They sought superiority within the African American community in Ruby to compensate for the mistreatment they experienced during the war. After gaining economic and social status in Ruby, they viewed themselves as rulers of the entire town. Despite escaping mainstream American society, they remained deeply entrenched in their own value system. As they accumulated power and wealth, their vanity and selfishness increased correspondingly, causing them to lose compassion, dignity, and humanity and become indifferent to the suffering of others.

Deacon Morgan once loved Consolata, but he left her when he felt his male authority was challenged, and later killed her during the massacre at the Convent. The Morgan brothers resisted integrating with white culture, fearing it would contaminate Ruby’s values. They saw the Convent women as a threat to their patriarchal power and resorted to violence. Their actions lacked the Confucian moral virtue of “empathy” (*shu* 恕), which involves considering others’ perspectives and showing empathy. Confucius’ disciple, Zilu (子路), once asked Confucius, “Is there a single word that can serve as the guide to conduct throughout one’s life?” Confucius replied, “It is perhaps the word *shu*. Do not impose on others what you do not want (others to impose on you) (*Analects*, 2014, p. 302). Confucius insisted that *shu* is a moral quality and the lifelong pursuit of the sages. Due to the lack of the moral character of *shu*, the Morgan brothers became more arrogant and cruel, ultimately leading to tragedy for the Convent women and their own downfall.

On the contrary, Consolata serves as the moral and virtuous spiritual leader of the Convent, bringing together the black women. Rescued by her godmother at nine years old, she later becomes a devoted nun under her godmother’s guidance. Following the betrayal by her lover Deacon and the passing of her mother, she experiences distress and guilt. She then chooses to become a therapist, offering love and support to the other women in the Convent. Initially, these women view each other as intruders in their space, leading to unfriendly relationships.

Mavis was the first to arrive at the Convent. When Gigi arrived, Mavis thought, “No way, no way at all. Mother’s gone, but Connie’s okay. I’ve been here for almost three years, and this house is where we are. Us. Not her.” (77)

<sup>5</sup> Pre-Qin period (2,100 BC-221BC), refers to the period preceding the Qin dynasty (221-206) in Chinese history with a time span of over 1,800 years. It goes through 3 different historical stages, the Xia dynasty (2,070 BC-1,600 BC), The Shang dynasty (1,600 BC-1,046 BC), the Zhou dynasty (1,046BC-221BC), during which the great ancient Chinese people created glorious civilization with their intelligence and hard working.

Gigi always dressed in the simplest clothes, liked to flirt with the young people, and sunbathed naked in Consolata's yard. Mavis was resentful and the two women often clashed, showing no sympathy or understanding for each other. Consolata, observing their mutual hostility, shared her own experiences of being tormented by physical and spiritual trauma, eventually finding herself again as a "spiritual therapist" under the guidance of her godmother. Consolata transformed from a self-blaming woman to the new leader in the Convent, serving as a spiritual guide for other women. She encouraged them to express their inner feelings, emotions, and traumatic experiences, helping them move beyond their traumatic pasts and establish relationships with other women. After sharing their unfortunate experiences, they began to trust and understand others. Ultimately, these women recovered from their painful pasts, and discovered their true selves, and established sisterly relationships.

The women of the Convent successfully turned their pain into strength. Led by Consolata, the Convent became an ideal refuge and a place of healing for women who had experienced trauma. These women offered support to others with love and patience, creating a sense of security for those who were in need. Consolata was referred to as the "ideal parent, friend, and companion," helping other women alleviate the hardships and pressure of life,

This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of the best, who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened to; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was. (p. 262)

As the spiritual guide for the other women at the Convent, Consolata awakened their awareness of morality and virtue. Together, they established an inclusive community without hierarchy, racial divisions, or patriarchy, creating a place of equality for everyone, free from discrimination and prejudice, contributing to the holistic development of the women's characters.

For more than three centuries, African Americans have been subjected to messages of inferiority and ugliness, leading to a lack of self-respect and awareness. Morrison believed that loving their own bodies is the first step to self-love. The ability to freely control their own bodies is particularly crucial for African American women facing white sexual oppression. The concept of "Unity of Heaven and Human" also advocates that caring for and protecting one's body is crucial for building self-awareness and self-worth. Loving oneself starts with cherishing and taking care of one's own body.

In *Paradise*, the women achieve unity of body and spirit guided by Consolata and through self-awareness. Before seeking refuge in the Convent, they all faced different traumas. For example, Mavis suffered serious physical and psychological trauma inflicted by her husband and experienced contempt from the community. These experiences led her to lose her dignity and self-worth, believing "she was the dumbest bitch on the planet" (p. 37). Another woman, Gigi, was a victim of racial discrimination and haunted by the killing of a black boy by a white police officer, trying to seek a sense of existence through sexual relationships with different men.

As for Seneca, she experienced emotional trauma due to a lack of family love. She was abandoned by her mother at a young age and sent to different foster homes where she suffered harassment. The absence of maternal love and affection caused her severe physical and mental trauma, as "childhood suffering has a serious impact on one's life that may lead to childhood trauma" (Randa & Nermin, 2022, p. 18) Similarly, Pallas suffered greatly due to her mother's affair with her boyfriend and was raped by a stranger. The women in the Convent have all experienced various forms of physical and psychological trauma, leading to a loss of self-esteem and self-worth. However, under the guidance of Consolata, they successfully reconstructed their self-identity by creating a "magical" painting, rediscovering the importance of recognizing the beauty of their bodies and their self-worth,

First with natural features: breasts and pudenda, toes, ears, and head hair. Seneca duplicated in Robin's egg blue one of her more elegant scars, one drop of red at its tip. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor. (265)

While drawing their own bodies on the floor, they understood the meaning of "my body is nothing my spirit everything" (p. 270). After realizing the importance of the body, they no longer confined themselves to the flesh body and began to appreciate the beauty of their bodies. They first started to love their bodies, then realized the importance of the spirit in constructing their identities. Under Consolata's guidance, the women of the Convent awakened to self-respect, self-love, and self-awareness. Eventually, they began to heal from past traumas, reconstructing their identities as individuals, and finding a complete self where body and soul are united. Several years later, Mavis transformed from a cowardly girl into a confident, independent woman, regaining freedom and identity in spirit and body. Seneca

realized her independence, understanding that she did not need her mother's love and affection to construct her identity; Gigi learned how to become a lovely person without using inappropriate tricks, and ultimately evolved into an elegant, justice-filled woman. Consolata serves as the guiding force leading the Convent women out of spiritual anguish, achieving the reconstruction of their identities. The journey of self-identity construction begins with their recognition of the beauty of their bodies, overcoming the oppression of patriarchy. Morrison's portrayal of these Convent women leads readers to the conclusion that self-respect and self-worth are essential prerequisites for constructing one's own identity.

## 5. Conclusion

In *Paradise*, Morrison depicts the experiences and personality traits of different characters from the perspectives of humans and nature, humans and society, and humans with self. Morrison posits that the key factor in identity construction is the relationship between people and nature. In the context of modern industrialization, the residents of Ruby Town, represented by the Morgan brothers, display greed in exploiting natural resources, leading to a disharmonious relationship with nature. In contrast, the Convent women led by Consolata embrace a simple, primitive lifestyle, and find solace and strength in nature, achieving harmonious coexistence with nature. The construction of an individual's self-identity is influenced by their relationships with others in society, through which they gain support and a sense of belonging. Morrison's work emphasizes the importance of mutual understanding and respect in interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the relationship between a person and their inner self, including possession of morals, virtues, self-respect, self-love, and self-worth, plays a significant role in self-identity construction. In the novel, the Convent women, guided by Consolata, ultimately achieve unity of body and soul, rebuilding their self-identity.

The concept of "Unity of Heaven and Human" encompasses the relationships between humans and nature, humans and society, and humans with their inner selves. In *Paradise*, Morrison depicts various characters through these relationships, highlighting the essential role of harmonious relationships in shaping a complete self-identity. The Confucian concept of "Unity of Heaven and Human" is vividly and clearly embodied in *Paradise*. Although numerous scholars have analyzed and interpreted this novel from various perspectives, none have yet identified any similarities and embodiment between the Confucian "Unity of Heaven and Human" and the ideas expounded by Morrison in *Paradise*. Hence, it is valuable to interpret and study *Paradise* with the concept of "Unity of Heaven and Human".

## Acknowledgments

This paper is one of the achievements of the Chinese Scholarship Council (NO. 202208330264).

## References

- Analects. Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Annping Chin, Penguin Group (USA) LLC New York, 2014.
- Chinyere T. O. "Resistance and Deflection to the Contempt of Others: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eyes" [J]. *Aquino Journal of Philosophy*, (2022): 181-195.
- Christian, Barbara. "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison" [J]. *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, (1980): 65-78.
- Lihua Zhao, *Space Politics: A Study of Toni Morrison's Novels* [M]. Sichuan: Sichuan University Press, 2011.
- Lilfrich, C. "Anti-Exodus: Counteremory, Gender, Race and Everyday life in Toni Morrison's Paradise" [J]. *Modern Fiction Studies*, (2006): 321-49.
- Mencius. "The Works of Mencius" in *The Four Books*, collation by Zhongde Liu and Zhiye Luo, Chinese by Bojun Yang, English by Legge, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Changsha: Hunan People's Press, 1992.
- Meng Peiyuan. "The Ecological Significance and Value of the Study of Humanity," *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 2007.
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise* [M]. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Random House, Inc. 1998.
- Randa, M. T. D & Nermin A. H. "Childhood Trauma and the Quest for Self-Realization in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child" [J]. *The International Journal of Childhood and Women's Studies*, (2022):18-33.
- Shouren, Wang & Wu Xinyun. *Gender, Race, Culture-Toni Morrison and 20<sup>th</sup> Century African-American Literature* [M].



Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1997.

Tamilselvi, Dr. A. & R. W. Prabha. "Discovery of 'Self' and 'Identity' of Afro-Americans in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Tar Baby*" [J]. *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature*, Vol. 4 (2016): 79-84.

Weever, de Jacqueline. "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*" [J]. *CLA Journal*, (1979): 402-13.

Zai, Zhang. *Words by Master Zhang* [M]. Trans. Wang Fuzhi, Zhonghua Shuju, 2009.