“QUIET AS IT’S KEPT”: SECRECY AND SILENCE IN TONI MORRISON’S

THE BLUEST EYE, JAZZ, AND PARADISE

Whitney Renee Smith

Submitted to the faculty of the University Graduate School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree
Master of Arts
in the Department of English
Indiana University

May 2011
Accepted by the Faculty of Indiana University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Karen R. Johnson, Ph.D., Chair

Missy Dehn Kubitschek, Ph.D.

Jonathan R. Eller, Ph.D.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a debt of gratitude to my thesis committee, without whom this project would not have been completed:

Dr. Johnson for always being willing to meet and talk things through with me from the first idea to final revisions. On occasions too numerous to count she helped me work through difficulties in my writing. I really enjoyed our conversations about Morrison and a hundred other topics. She was a great advisor and became a friend.

Dr. Kubitschek’s expertise on my subject matter was invaluable, as was her research direction. Her input and advice were of much assistance as I was preparing to write.

Dr. Eller was always available for my questions, despite relevance. I greatly admire him as a scholar and professor and appreciate him taking time the time to help me polish my writing.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for supporting me through this process:

Pam Smith for having boundless faith in my abilities and convincing me of the same when needed. She is always there to listen and encourage. My friends who were always there to offer support, advice, and when needed, a welcome distraction.
“QUIET AS IT’S KEPT”: SECRECY AND SILENCE IN TONI MORRISON’S
THE BLUEST EYE, JAZZ, AND PARADISE

Secrets and silence appear frequently in the work of Toni Morrison. In three novels, The Bluest Eye, Jazz, and Paradise, she repeats a specific phrase that acts as a signal to the reader. Morrison three times writes, “Quiet as it’s kept” in her novels to alert readers to the particular significance secrets and silence play in these novels. Morrison portrays this secrecy and silence as a barrier to building strong communities and even a strong self-identity. While the phrase appears in the same form, with each subsequent appearance, Morrison takes the idea a step further. In each novel she demonstrates how breaking the silence and refusing to keep quiet is an act of healing or salvation and she expands this healing to be increasingly inclusive. What begins as a single voice breaking the silence in The Bluest Eye becomes a group of people sharing their secrets in Jazz, and finally an entire town coming to terms with the power of speaking up. This thesis looks at the secrets and their impact on characters in each novel and explores the progression of the power in refusing to keep quiet.

Karen R. Johnson, Ph.D., Chair
TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

II. The Bluest Eye: “An uneasy quiet.” ....................................................................................................... 5

III. Jazz: “What good are secrets if you can’t talk to anybody about them?” ........................................ 28

IV. Paradise: “Every true thing is okay.” ................................................................................................. 48

V. Conclusion ............................................................................................................................................... 72

Works Cited ............................................................................................................................................... 79

Curriculum Vitae