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Keeping A Hold On Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

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KEEPING A HOLD ON LIFE: READING TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

Gloria Jean Watkins, Ph.D.
University of California, Santa Cruz, 1983

"Keeping A Hold On Life: Reading Toni Morrison's Fiction" is an intensive discussion of The Bluest Eye and Sula. In the Introduction the social and political forces that have enabled Morrison to escape the obscurity that has been the fate of many gifted black women writers is examined. Also discussed is the extent to which Morrison's images of black females represent oppositional alternatives to the stereotypical images that abound in American fiction in such characters as Carson McCuller's Bernice, William Faulkner's Dilsey, Gertrude Stein's Melanatha. Most American writers have used images of black women to embody their own racial myths and fantasies creating caricature-like figures. It is only in the works of black women writers, like Morrison, that readers find fully-realized, multi-dimensional black female characters. In all the above discussions Morrison is considered biographically as her public statements regarding her work have influenced critical readings.

Critical essays on The Bluest Eye and Sula comprise the main body of the dissertation. Discussion of The Bluest Eye focuses on Morrison's use of reading as a socially constructed act reinforcing systems of domination--racism, sexism, class hierarchy. The emphasis in the essay is on the novel as a chronicle of Claudia's triumphant self-realization and Pecola's radical vision of a transformed world wherein domination is not the only possible means of influence and

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communication between people. Discussion of Sula focuses on the idea of a female hero, her quest for self-realization, and the community's use of her as a scapegoat. Central to this discussion is a questioning of the assumption that Sula is a feminist text celebrating the power of woman bonding.

Concluding these two essays is a discussion of the interrelatedness of The Bluest Eye and Sula. In each novel Morrison uses community to trace various stages in the development of black social history. As communities are altered by forces outside the control of the inhabitants, their lives are radically changed. In this essay the differences between the two fictional communities are highlighted within the context of a discussion of the use of fiction as a way to reclaim positive aspects of black history that one often ignored. A discussion of Claudia and Sula as potential feminist heroines follows that examines utopia female communities in both works.

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Before black life rearranged itself into elusive symbols of dashikis, pimp hats and kente-cloth bikinis, we had a hold on life, an attitude which was most dramatically expressed in one particular area. This attitude was so strong and so familiar it never seemed to need definition--or never needed it until now when its death seems right at hand. It concerned work and the way we worked. There was a press toward excellence in the execution of just about everything we tackled, I don't mean the will to "make it," although there was that, too. Nor do I mean the spine-breaking labor required by overseers. I mean the pride in work well done for its own sake. . . .

Toni Morrison
"Rediscovering Black History"

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In a talk delivered March 1, 1959 at a conference convened by the American Society of African Culture, two weeks before the Broadway opening of A Raisin In The Sun Lorraine Hansberry declared the work of African-American writers to be:

> . . . the vast task of cultural and historical reclamation--to reclaim the past if we would claim the future.[1]

Although Toni Morrison has made no such declaration, her work, more than that of any other contemporary African-American writer, exemplifies this credo. Her fiction is rooted in the distinct folk culture of black people in the United States, a culture created in isolated, segregated communities. In marginal spaces, usually on the edges of towns or across railroad tracks, black people were able to develop unique ways of perceiving reality and construct value systems that were not like those of Anglo-American ethnics. White people did not write about these communities in their anthropological and sociological treatises on black American life nor did they write about them in fiction, drama, or poetry. The black culture they depicted was largely based on distortions, misinformation, stereotypes. It was the view from the outside. Morrison writes about black culture with the authenticity and sincerity of an insider. It is the memory of her growing-to-womanhood years within the confines of a distinct black culture that is the foundation of her imaginative process, the force that inspires her work. Her muse is history, but not history as it has been conventionally written or told. It is, as she puts it, "history as life lived."[2] Her central focus is on

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black people, all else is peripheral, secondary.

Morrison published her first novel in 1970. She was thirty-nine years old. She began her publishing career at perhaps the most auspicious time for a black writer and particularly a black female writer to emerge. Her artistic debut occurred in the wake of militant struggle by black people to resist racial oppression and at the peak of the contemporary women's liberation movement. The combined energies of these two movements created an atmosphere in which interest in the attitudes, thoughts, and feeling of black women could be expressed without fear of ridicule or outright dismissal. Prior to the seventies black male writers who addressed in their fiction the issue of racial oppression or the specific political plight of black men received more attention than either black women writers or black male writers whose works focused on black female experience. A white reading public that could barely respond to the poetic prose and poetry of Jean Toomer (who remains one of the few black male writers to portray complex black female characters) passionately consumed the male centered writing of Richard Wright, whose fiction continually characterized blacks as a brute race made bestial by racial oppression. It does not diminish the power or significance of Wright's work that white audiences tended to read his fictional portrayals of black life as definitive documentation of black experience.

Unfortunately Wright was not able to imagine that a reading audience could absorb fiction by black writers that celebrated and affirmed positive dimensions of black experience as well as protest

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fiction. Wright was particularly critical of the work of black woman writer Zora Neale Hurston claiming that she perpetuated negative stereotypes by making it appear that black life was really like a minstrel show. Wright never understood the need for a literature which showed that black people did not spend all their time focusing on racial injustice. Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway explores her reasons for refusing to allow racial injustice to be the dominant theme in her writing:

> By leaving out "the problem," by emphasizing the art in the folkloric phenomenon, Hurston implicitly told whites: Contrary to your arrogant assumptions, you have not really affected us that much; we continue to practice our culture, which as a matter of fact is more alive, more aesthetically pleasing than your own; and it is not solely a product of defensive reactions to your actions. She felt that black culture manifested an independent esthetic system that could be discussed without constant reference to white oppression.[3]

Like Hurston, Toni Morrison has been accused of writing fiction that "romanticizes" black life. Critic Addison Gayle, long time advocate of a prescriptive criticism "the black aesthetic" denounced Morrison's work in his essay "Blueprint for Black Criticism" arguing that her fiction belonged to that "special kind of 'Negritude'" which portrayed blacks as "singing, dancing, playing, intuitive and instinctual in nature."[4] Gayle sees Morrison as following in the path of Langston Hughes, a path mapped out in the manifesto "The Negro Writer and The Racial Mountain." Hughes celebrated the featured of black life that many black intellectuals were ashamed to embrace and urged everyone to join the celebration:

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> Let the blare of Negro jazz bands and the bellowing voice of Bessie Smith singing Blues penetrate the closed ears of the colored near-intellectuals until they listen and perhaps understand. Let Paul Robeson singing "Water Boy," and Rudolph Fisher writing about the streets of Harlem, and Jean Toomer holding the heart of Georgia in his hands, and Aaron Douglas drawing strange black fantasies cause the smug Negro middle class to turn from their white, respectable, ordinary books and papers to catch a glimmer of their own beauty. We younger artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temple for tomorrow, strong as we know, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[5]

Gayle may interpret this statement as a defense of negritude but it is clearly an assertion that black writers must be autonomous, free to choose both the subject of their art and the nature of the expression.

Morrison has spoken against attempts by critics to define and control the form and content of black writing. Those critics who do not see her as romanticizing black life contend that she creates in her fiction exaggerated portraits of the pain and anguish black people face. Discussing the work of three contemporary black writers in the New York Review of Books Diane Johnson described Morrison's work as "more painful than the gloomiest impression encouraged by either stereotype or sociology."[6] Responding to Johnson's assertion Morrison comments:

> She is saying that there is only one notion of Black life. I'm not allowed to have a different Black life than Gayle Jones or James McPherson. But there is as much variety in our lives as there is skin color.[7]

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African-American writers have always struggled to maintain their autonomy; that struggle has taken place on a number of ideological fronts. Barbara Christian addresses this issue in her discussion of changing images of black female characters in Black Women Novelists: The Development of A Tradition:

> From the beginning, the black novel had to struggle with the cloak of "theological terror" that Baldwin elucidates in his discussion of protest literature. That is, black writers would constantly have to distinguish between black people as white Americans saw them (as a moral problem and a dumping ground for their fears) and as complex human beings. At the same time, black writers would have to wrestle with the ramifications of white American stereotypes that so strongly affected the lives of Black people as a group. Black thinkers would have to articulate the concepts of their own culture, even as there was resistance to that articulation from within as well as from without. Only then could they dismiss Anglo-American cultural norms as their conceptual framework. Only then could they begin to draw inspiration and material from the forms of their own culture that lay embedded in the rich oral and musical traditions of the folk.[8]

These concerns compel black writers to address the issue of social responsibility. The notion that literature emerges as a pure act of the imagination, unaffected by the particular political and social milieu in which it is rooted has had little appeal for black writers. Armed with an acute awareness of the power of the written word (engendered by their knowledge of the years whites attempted to deny blacks access to reading and writing skills) they have insisted that the reading public recognize that all works of literature, irrespective of their aesthetic appeal, are to some extent social and political.

More than most black women writers Lorraine Hansberry was particularly concerned with the question of social responsibility.

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She insisted that all literature makes social statements:

> I persist in the simple view that all art is ultimately social: that which agitates and that which prepares the mind for slumber. The writer is deceived who thinks that he has some other choice. The question is not whether one will make a social statement in ones' work--but only what the statement will say--for if it says anything it will be social.[9]

Like Hansberry, Morrison is concerned with the question of social responsibility. Though she began writing with the aim "to write the kind of book that I wanted to read" her awareness of the political and social ramifications of fiction by black writers caused her perspective to change:

> There was also something else--I felt that nobody talked about or wrote about those Black people the way I knew those people to be. And I was aware of that fact, that it was rare. Aware that there was an enormous amount of apology going on, even in the best writing.
>
> But more important than that, there was so much explanation . . . the Black writers always explained something to somebody else. And I didn't want to explain anything to anybody else![10]

When asked for whom she writes Morrison answers:

> I always wanted to read Black books in which I was enlightened. I as a black person. There are not many books like that. Even the best of them are explaining something to White people. And of course there are a lot of critics who believe that our books are there to tell them what our lives are all about.[11]

Although Morrison feels she has a responsibility to address herself and by so doing addresses black people, she is not writing for a black audience or a white audience:

> If you start out writing for some people that you're going to have in mind, it loses something, gets sort of watered down and didactic.[12]

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While people who control the mechanisms of book production and distribution have often expected, and at times required, black writers to function more as spokespersons for the race on various issues rather than as artists addressing their craft or their work. Black proponents of the "Black Aesthetic" school mandate that literature by black writers should function as a political medium for the uplift of the race, raising awareness about racial oppression and teaching resistance. As a consequence of these expectations many black writers have allowed their work to be overtaken or subsumed by political concerns. Morrison does not experience conflict over her autonomy as an artist and her concern for and engagement with political issues that impact directly on the social situation of all black people. She addresses political issues in her fiction without compromising aesthetics. She writes essays on a number of political issues, that may or may not be directly related to her imaginative work. Hence she does not attempt to make her fiction function as a primary medium for the expression of her political activism.

Given the patriarchal social context in which we live, black male writers and critics have until recently been at the forefront of discussions about the nature of fiction by black writers. Many prominent black male writers continue to address primarily the impact of racial oppression on black men in their fiction. Morrison suggests that much of the fiction and non-fiction written by black males prior to and during the 1960's reflected their need to explain themselves to white men:

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> These books and political slogans about power were addressed to white men trying to explain or prove something to them. The fight was between men, for king of the hill.[13]

Such a statement creates polarities between black female and male writers that need not exist. Just as Ishmael Reed's assertion in 1977 that his book Flight To Canada sold only 8,000 copies because white readers are only interested in the fiction of black women writers is rather extreme:

> Maybe if I was one of those young female Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can do no wrong.[14]

Black women writers are not deflecting attention away from the work of black men; they are simply receiving deserved acknowledgement and recognition. Few black writers today, female or male, are directing their work solely towards a white audience. Certainly in the not so distant past all black novelists knew that the white reading public's response to a work could determine its success or failure. At that time black writers, male and female, frequently addressed their work to a white audience. Morrison can choose to write in the direction of a black audience and be confident that her work will be read by people from various ethnic groups. The xenophobia that was once so all pervasive among Anglo-Americans and other groups in this society now co-exists with expression of interest and even envy of people from different ethnic groups with unique social habits and customs.

There are some striking differences in the fiction created by black women and that created by black men which may account for the current response to writing by black females. Most important is the

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choice of subject matter, which seems to follow gender lines. Black male writers address more directly in ther work larger political issues; they focus more on interactions between whites and blacks. Whereas black female writers focus on racial oppression they are more concerned with the relationship between family and community, with examining the way black people relate to one another. Alice Walker emphasizes that this difference in subject matter has meant that the work of black women has been devalued by black and white critics:

> It seems to me that black writing has suffered, because even black critics have assumed that a book that deals with the relationships between members of a black family--or between a man and a woman--is less important than one that has white people as primary antagonist. The consequence of this is that many of our books by "major" writers (always male) tell us little about the culture, history, or future, imagination, fantasies, etc., of black people, and a lot about isolated (often improbable) or limited encounters with a nonspecific white world. Where is the book (aside from Cane), that equals Elechi Amadi's The Concubine, for example? A book that exposes the subconscious of a people, because the people's dreams, imagining, rituals, legends, etc., are known to be important, are known to contain the accumulated collective reality of the people themselves. . . . The white man is mysterious, a force to be reckoned with, but he is not glorified to such an extent that the Africans turn their attention away from themselves and their own imagination and culture. Which is what often happens with "protest literature." The superficial becomes--for a time--the deepest reality, and replaces the still waters of the collective subconscious.[15]

Current interest in the work of black women writers has been generated not simply because they are female but because their work evokes many distinct positive and negative features of African-American culture. Morrison believes there is a spirit of joy in the

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works of many black women writers that is rarely, if ever, found in black male fiction:

> Frequently, what I found so lacking in most black writing by men that seems to be present in a lot of black women's writing is a sense of joy, in addition to oppression and being women or black or whatever. With some exceptions. Gayle Jones is an exception to that. She never writes about joy. I think that's because she's young. But with others, there is a sense of comfort in being who one is, there's an expression of good times, not in the sense of "going out somewhere." There's a scene in Sula where the women are just having some fun, talking to one another. They enjoy that. That kind of woman. In Lucille Clifton's Generations, there's that sense of fun and joy. In Toni Cade, there's that sense of high-spiritedness. I don't mean comedy and I don't mean jokes or anything. But part of this business of living in the world and triumphing over it had to with a sense that there's some pleasure.[16]

Most prominent black women writers are mothers. Placed by this society as women in the nurturing role (which is, when chosen, one of the highest forms of committment to another human being) they may in their private lives struggle harder than those who do not nurture to find the pleasures, the joys in living even if they are small pleasures, small joys, so as not to be passing on a legacy of despair. This may explain the emphasis on affirming aspects of black culture in black women's fiction.

Many Morrison readers find a beauty and an emotional vibrancy in her fiction that is exciting and exhilarating. It is as if she has managed to weave into her words the deep and abiding love that was the essence of her childhood, the sense of "home." Her work has "style." Style as black folks have used the word indicates a unique manner of living and being; it represents a harmonious merging of the inner spirit with the outer--it is that union made manifest.

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Significantly black "style" has always fascinated white people. When they are threatened by it they attempt to destroy it. When they can, they appropriate or exploit it. It has only been recently in the wake of much struggle, many deaths, and great sorrow that they have been able to enjoy it, to let it be. Celebrated--praised--Morrison's fiction reclaims the African-American past, the folk tradition, the mythic, giving readers something of that life to hold onto.

Often white critics fail to recognize the far reaching significance of Morrison's work despite its specificity. While they applaud her for not using the political rhetoric they see as characterizing black fiction (many reviewers of her work seem to be ignorant of the works of Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, Zora Hurston regarding her as the first if not the only black writer to use lyrical language) they criticize her work by saying it lacks universality. Sara Blackburn's review of Sula, written for the New York Times, exemplifies this tendency. In the concluding paragraphs Blackburn writes:

> Morrison hasn't endowed her people with life beyond their place and function in the novel, and we can't imagine their surviving outside the tiny community where they carry on their separate lives. It's this particular quality that makes "Sula" a novel whose long-range impact doesn't sustain the intensity of its first reading. Reading it, in spite of its richness and its thorough originality, one continually feels its narrowness, its refusal to brim over into the world outside its provincial setting.[17]

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, a work considered an example of classic American literature, complete with endless universal implications, is situated in as tiny a community, much as provincial a setting as Sula. There is one difference: the primary characters

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in Hawthorne's novel are white. It is highly unlikely that Blackburn would consider it lacking sustained power for any of the above reasons. Sula may lack sustained reading power for many audiences but that may be more indicative of their narrow-mindedness, their provinciality, their inability to transcend their own experience, and less a reflection of the novel's aesthetic merit.

White critics have always attempted to undermine the importance of exceptional fiction by black writers by charging that it lacks universality. In the Western literary tradition "universal" has been a term applied to works that have far-reaching appeal and significance, works that address general human concerns that transcend the barriers of race, sex, class, language difference, and geography. Although white Western literary critics can see the universal implication in as culturally specific a work as The Great Gatsby or William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury they tend to balk at the suggestion that any black American writers create works with universal implications. Perhaps Blackburn, like many other white critics and writers cannot imagine that a black woman's struggle for selfhood may be similar to the struggles of individuals globally. Indeed this would seem to be particularly the case in a world pre-dominately inhabited by non-white people, more than half of whom are women.

Having accused Morrison of not writing a "universal" fiction Blackburn proceeds to devalue her ancestral heritage:

> As the author of frequent criticism and social commentary, Morrison has shown herself someone of considerable strength and skill in confronting current realities, and it's frustrating that the qualities

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> which distinguish her novels are not combined with the stinging immediacy, the urgency of her non-fiction. . . . Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvelous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists now working.[18]

Blackburn does not conceive of the possibility that Morrison may feel no need to transcend her identity as a "black woman writer" because it is the source of her power and in no way a category that restricts or limits her. Understanding that white people often think they are flattering her by implying that she is more than just a "black woman writer" Morrison proudly asserts:

> Of course I'm a black writer. That's like saying Dostoevski's not a Russian writer. They mean I'm not <u>just</u> a black writer but categories like black writer, woman writer and Latin American writer aren't marginal anymore. We have to acknowledge that the thing we call "literature" is pluralistic now, just as society ought to be. The melting pot never worked. We ought to be able to accept on equal terms everybody from the Hasidim to Walter Lippmann, from the Rastafarians to Ralph Bunche.[19]

Thinking of the black writer as <u>just</u> a black writer leads white critics to conclude that works by black authors that focus primarily or exclusively on black life can never have universal appeal. Of course works of fiction by black writers have always had universal appeal. Many white people cannot register this appeal because they have been taught via the ideology of white supremacy that universality is synonomous with whiteness. They lack the capacity to empathize

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fully or identify with black characters. Teaching Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye to a class of white students, I emphasized that Pecola's sense that to be beautiful one must have blue eyes and blond hair, is a characteristic she shared with white women in this society as well as with black women. This connection had not occurred to white female students because they were focusing on Pecola's blackness. Morrison's fiction attracts audiences from diverse backgrounds precisely because she addresses issues that have universal appeal and implication even as she maintains the cultural specificity of her text.

In the short space of twelve years Toni Morrison has written and published four novels. Her first novel The Bluest Eye was published in 1970. Although it received favorable reviews it was not widely read. Sula, her second novel, was published in 1973 and attracted the attention of many feminist women seeking to read books by and about women. It was Song of Solomon, Morrison's third book published in 1977, that won her recognition as a major American writer. As a result of the publication of her fourth novel Tar Baby Morrison's photo appeared on the March 30, 1981 cover of Newsweek magazine. Included in this issue was a feature article on her work with an interview and excerpts from all the novels.

One of the most important contributions Morrison has made to American fiction has been in the area of characterization and particularly characterization of black females. Noted black male scholar C. L. R. James believes that Morrison is an extremely important contemporary black writer because of her focus on the black female experience. Coupling her with Alice Walker, he emphasizes:

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> . . . they are black women writing about black women today. They are writing not about how black women are being persecuted and spat upon by white imperialism, they are talking about black women and their dealings with women and black men. They aren't seeking to impress white people at all. They are taking the black people for what they are. Now in Toni Morrison's book Song of Solomon, I felt that here was a woman who was part of the American literary world, sophisticated, well educated, etc., but who was still writing about black people but looking at them from the point of view of sophisticated literary writing in the United States . . .
>
> A young woman gave me a book called Sula, and there I saw particularly in the second half of the book, that Toni Morrison had written about a black woman with the eyes and the feelings of a writer who was interested in the black woman. I mean Sula had nothing to do with what white people thought or what Westerners thought--she said, "I have my own standards in the life I have lived." But in Song of Solomon Morrison doesn't really get down to it as she does in Sula.[20]

In The Bluest Eye and Sula, female characters were the central figures. Male characters were primary in Song of Solomon and more primary than female characters in Tar Baby. Morrison has not been asked in recent interviews to explain her reasons for choosing to make black male characters (and even one white male character) central figures in her last two novels. Whatever her reason it is a gesture of artistic autonomy that need not be criticized. However it does have larger implications. Given that ours is a society where black women have rarely received recognition and acknowledgement of their presence, accomplishments, and contributions, it is both exciting to witness Morrison's literary success and not surprising that the works for which she receives most acclaim are those that focus on the struggle of black men to achieve their identity, their manhood. Throughout the history of black people in the United States attention

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has been focused on the impact of racial oppression on black males. Often freedom for black people is talked about in terms that equate it with the liberation of black manhood. Even though this society has been obsessed with the sexuality of all black people, it has been particularly interested in the sexual habits of black men. It is not that black men have represented a greater threat to white supremacy than black women. It is simply that we still live in a society where the actions of black men are deemed more important than the actions of black women.

At the very peak of the women's movement black woman writer Michelle Wallace published a book which was a best seller--Black Macho And The Myth of The Superwoman. A white female literary agent commented to me that the marketing success of this book was largely due to the title, since we all know this culture is obsessed with "macho," and even more obsessed with "black macho." Her implication was obviously that the book was read not because of its discussion of black women but because of the focus on black men. In part she is correct. Had the title been Black Women: The Myth of the Superwoman it would never have reached the best seller list; it would never have been talked about on national television. Just as Morrison's first two novels which focus on black females striving for selfhood have yet to receive the attention lavished on Tar Baby and Song of Solomon.

The Bluest Eye and Sula were both published before Morrison was a famous novelist and they have not yet received the extensive critical analysis they deserve. It is not yet apparent whether the

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current interest in Morrison's fiction will lead critics to read anew her earlier work. John Irving reviewed Tar Baby for The New York Times and made no mention of The Bluest Eye. He wrote two sentences paraphrasing Sula. Labeling Tar Baby Morrison's "most ambitious book" Irving writes that her "greatest accomplishment is that she has raised her novel above the social realism that too many black novels and women's novels are trapped in." He concludes, "She has succeeded in writing about race and women symbolically."[21] These statements seem ludicrous to readers of Invisible Man, Cane, Dem, or any novel by Ishmael Reed; all works by black writers which are more concerned with the mythic than with social realism. One of Morrison's accomplishments is her ability to integrate social realism with the fantastical, the mythic, in a subtle way so that the supernatural is made to seem as commonplace as the most trivial everyday life experience.

Structurally Tar Baby is the least interesting of Morrison's works to date; it lacks the experimentation in style and form that characterized the earlier works. Even though her recent fiction has received much more critical acclaim The Bluest Eye and Sula surpass Tar Baby and Song of Solomon in sheer artistry and strength of characterization. It is a mistake to read Morrison's novels as representing stages in a progression towards "greatness" for to do so is to diminish the artistic merit of the first two novels which are excellent works deserving of critical attention. The current emphasis on Song of Solomon and Tar Baby make it all the more important for critics to extend that celebration to The Bluest Eye and Sula, as both works represent a radical shift in fictional portraits

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of black women and black life in American literature.

As a teacher of fiction in courses focusing on writing by black women Morrison has found there is a dearth of serious criticism of the works of black women writers. She also acknowledges that "there isn't a lot of first-rate criticism about black women writers." When asked what type of issues she would like to see raised in criticism of black literature and particularly literature by black women Morrison answers:

> Certain questions occur to me when I try to think of the body of black literature that there is in general and the body of black literature that women have produced. . . . I was very interested in how contemporary black women looked at the stereotype of black women. Did they accept that role? Did the writers believe . . . that was pretty much the way we were? Were there characters representative of the mammy, whore, whatever? showgirl, whatever? And emasculation and so on? How political were they? Were the writings very, very directed by new political awareness or were they distant from that, were they outside to so-called realm of politics? What were their perceptions about their role? How did they really see themselves? And even--if we could get a little deeper, if you could think in terms of not just characters but plot and tone and the attitudes of the woman writer toward the world in which she lives.[22]

Black women scholars share with Morrison a conviction that there must be more first-rate criticism of fiction by black women writers. Gloria T. Hull begins her essay "Rewriting Afro-American Literature" with a statement of justification and explanation as to why she is focusing her attention exclusively on works by black women:

> "At a time when Afro-American literature is still struggling for credibility," one may ask, "why make a case for fragmenting the discipline by studying black women writers separately? The reply is simple: Black women writers need special emphasis because they have not been given the attention they deserve. They are

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> less-known, less-taught, less well-taught, less criticized, and more readily dismissed than their male counterparts; and this is so for reasons which apparently have nothing--or very little--to do with their intrinsic merit and value.[23]

Black women scholars who focus their study on American literature have assumed major responsibility for producing a body of criticism that enlarges and enriches our understanding of literature by black women writers, as well as our knowledge of their relationship to the writing process. In 1979 three black women, Bevery Guy-Sheftall, Roseann Bell, and Bettye J. Parker published Sturdy Black Bridges a collection of essays, interviews, fiction, and poetry on the work of black women in Africa, America, and the Caribbean. More recently Barbara Christian published one of the first full length studies of literature by black females, Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976. These works are vital to those of us who are especially interested in the work of black women writers. Mary Helen Washington concludes her essay "New Lives and New Letters: Black Women Writers at the End of the Seventies" with the comment:

> Enough has been said about secrets, silences, and lying for all of us feminists to be aware of what black women writers need in order to come to full growth, but let me end with my own prescription: "Certainly, for the imagination to flourish they need a supportive community, i.e., someone to publish what they write, someone to read their books, someone to provide adequate, honest critical attention. They need connectedness with other writers." Even more, they need to see the full effect of their work made visible in the lives they wish to change.[24]

Past silences of black writers and particularly black women writers make it especially thrilling to witness Toni Morrison's ongoing artistic production. It gives me the sense that a barrier has been

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removed, not because she has written more than one book, but because she has written more than one exceptional work. These critical essays on The Bluest Eye and Sula are a gesture of recognition, of appreciation, of solidarity.

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"The Little-Girl-Gone-To Woman"

The Bluest Eye is a shocking book. Like Picasso's "Guernica," which startled the first onlookers by so graphically conveying the agony and violence of war, The Bluest Eye shocks because it vividly evokes the intense unbearable psychological pain that is a consequence of racial oppression. Were it a painting it would show mutilated, distorted, and crippled figures--figures similar to those portrayed in the paintings of Native American artists Fritz Scholder who, when asked by other Indians why he paints the Indian so ugly, responded, "But beauty isn't cute or pretty. Ugly can be beautiful."[25] One of the disturbing features of The Bluest Eye is that the ugly is beautiful. In a remarkable way Morrison depicts the dehumanizing effect of racial oppression while simultaneously showing that in the midst of such horror beauty takes shape. I am convinced that this explains why readers of the novel find it difficult to discuss the book. By presenting a worldview in which ugly is beautiful Morrison challenges the prevailing tendency in our society to see the ugly as that which must be hidden, avoided, even destroyed.

Since its publication in 1970 The Bluest Eye has been subjected to critical interpretations that fail to enhance reader awareness of its depth, complexity, and force. Generally, criticism of The Bluest Eye reflects the narrow scope of the methodological approaches employed by critical readers, approaches which do not lead to full engagement with

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the novel. Critics either explicate it, relying heavily on paraphrase to substantiate their comments, or they use "projection" an approach defined by Robert Scholes in Structuralism in Literature as "a way of seeing through literary works in the direction of the author, or of society, or some other object of interest to the critic."[26] Projection is the approach most commonly used in discussions of The Bluest Eye. It leads critics to read the text as if it were a sociological treatise on racism. They seem to study the novel from the outside-in, bringing to it knowledge and feelings about racism, and these factors more than the text inform their reading. Such criticism, though valuable in a context wherein the primary purpose of discussion is to strengthen our understanding of racism, leaves many important dimensions of the novel unexplored.

The tendency towards oversimplification in discussions of The Bluest Eye began in early reviews of the novel. Ignoring the structural complexity of the work, reviewers described it as if it were a basic linear narrative, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. A reviewer for Newsweek wrote that the novel was a "lyrical story" about growing up black and poor in a northern Ohio town."[27] Stressing that The Bluest Eye had suffered from "critical neglect," a reviewer for the New Yorker labeled it "one of the most painful and acute studies of black childhood."[28] Unfortunately literary critics discuss the work in a similar manner. They tell readers that "it is a novel portraying in poignant terms the tragic condition of blacks in a racist America;"[29] that "it is a female Bildungsroman, a novel of

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growing up, of growing up young and black and female in America;"[30] that "it is the story of even year old Pecola, seen, for the most part through the eyes of her classmate befrienders Claudia and Frieda;"[31] that it "presents a simple theme: the story of a black girl who wants blue eyes as a symbol of beauty and therefore of goodness and happiness."[32] These statements and the essays from which they were taken offer interpretations of The Bluest Eye that do not call attention to the structure of the novel, or the extent to which that structure accommodates a multiplicity of readings. In this essay I read The Bluest Eye by inverting the projective approach, that is to say, by reading the novel from the inside-out, relying on the text to indicate appropriate referents and interpretive stances.

Structurally The Bluest Eye is very complex. A diagram of the novel would show no systematized linear order. Attention shifts from one story to another with no obvious connecting links. All sections and chapters vary in length. Throughout the novel Morrison uses a number of stylistic techniques, realist, naturalist, surrealist. She employs a number of literary genres, epistolary, script, poetic prose, and song lyrics. Dialogues and interior monologues are written in the patois of African-American poor and working class people as well as standard English dialect, illustrating the varied forms and language techniques people use to communicate with one another in every-day-life. Technically, in The Bluest Eye Morrison achieves a structural synthesis of form and content. The structural fragmentation suggested by the non-linear order mirrors the psychic fragmentation of her characters.

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Just as the structural fragmentation creates a sense of diversity Morrison creates a multi-dimensional effect by placing a text within a text. The primary text includes all elements of the novel, beginning with the introductory statement directed at readers, Claudia's summary, her account of Pecola's story, the various portraits of characters, and the concluding statements. Within this text, the secondary text is Pecola's story. Placed within the frame of the text as a whole it is analogous to the position of the individual within a larger society or community, a position Morrison explores throughout the novel. The primary text encompasses the social history of the community; the secondary text focuses exclusively on Pecola's personal drama. These two frames give the novels its layered multi-dimensional effect.

All Morrison's techniques call attention to the novel as an art form. In response to critics who question her about the demise of the novel Morrison emphatically states that is is "the most demanding and the most challenging" genre.[33] The Bluest Eye represented Morrison's quest for new directions for the novel. While within the Western literary tradition the novel has frequently been used as a political tool to reinforce and maintain bourgeois ideology, The Bluest Eye is fundamentally an anti-bourgeois text. It is neither rooted in the circumstances of the ruling class nor does it justify and perpetuate the hegemony of that class. According to feminist critics Lise Vogel and Lillian Robinson, readers of American fiction are reluctant to acknowledge that literature conveys ideas that have a class origin and a class function. In their essay "Modernism and History" they describe

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the novel as "the bourgeois literary form par excellence" adding that the significant features of bourgeois ideology have to do "with fixed categories in 'human nature' and the 'human condition' that emphasize what is ideal, absolute, and private over what is material, fluid, and collective."[34]

In The Bluest Eye Morrison is concerned with material reality, with the everyday life experiences of her characters as they struggle for survival in a materialist society. She portrays them not in isolation but as they relate to the communal consciousness of the neighborhood, constructing a fictional reality wherein the privatized emotions of individuals are shown to have a direct correlation with the social hstory of their ethnic groups. Whereas the bourgeois novel often masks the existence of systems of domination, Morrison calls attention to them, showing the various ways they shape and determine the human condition, the nature of desire, as well as aesthetic judgement. Her emphasis on a fragmented world disrupts bourgeois assumptions that reality is fixed, static, and linear.

By example The Bluest Eye suggests that the novel does not exist to mirror the social reality of ruling class groups or their values. In this, it contradicts black critic Robert Felgar who states in "Black Content, White Form" that "the novel form has enjoyed a reputation for centuries as the vehicle for middle-class, WASP, bourgeois values."[35] He argues that it can never be the medium for the expression of a different reality principle:

> Literary structure predetermines what a writer can say; no matter how plastic the novel as a literary form,

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> it is a white invention and satisfies white needs, which cannot be rejected or modified with the very mode of organization which satisfied them. . . . . . The most radical anti-novel remains a novel, the most radical rejection of whiteness white, insofar as white language, style, and method of arrangement are employed, however critically or uncritically. The use of these forms is not only an implied tribute to their significance, but also a determination of what can be said.[35]

Felgar stubbornly refuses to allow for the disruption and change of what a form signifies. Yet it is precisely Morrison's ability to transcend the conventional scope of the novel in The Bluest Eye--to reconstruct the form so that it meets her needs, that is powerful and transformative.

Speaking of the forces that compelled her to write The Bluest Eye Morrison comments:

> I wrote about a victim who is a child and adults don't write about children. The novel is about a passive kind of person and the people around her who create the kind of situation that she is in. I did not think it would be widely distributed because it was about things that probably nobody was interested in except me. I was reading a kind of book that I had never read before.[36]

In a recent interview Morrison says she wrote in The Bluest Eye about "the people who in all literature were always peripheral--little black girls who were props, background; those people were never center stage and those people were me."[37] Morrison's fictional little black girls have a collective identity, one they share with her and with all black females growing to womanhood in a society that would see us only as props, as objects. Little black girls have not peopled the pages of American fiction because the middle class white men and women who are the majority published writers in this society are accustomed to

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centralizing their own experience, writing as if it is the only reality that merits recognition. They rarely if ever acknowledge the existence of people who dwell on the periphery of that experience, in marginal spaces. They do not cross the tracks to enter the homes of the poor and working class, the colonized, to eat their food, to smell their smells, to listen to their sounds, to hear their language. White literary critics have shown little interest in black characters who occupy marginal spaces in novels. Like the novelists they too are most interested in fictional portraits of those groups and individuals who have the greatest degree of class, race, and sex privilege. Similarly although white feminist critics have focused their attention on the gender based power relationship which inform Western literature they focus their attention almost exclusively on works written by white authors. Atypically and importantly a white feminist student critic remarks in her introductory comments prefacing an essay on The Bluest Eye:

> Fascinated by power, authority, the center, feminists concentrated on analyzing how the powerful have shaped our lives. We write at length about patriarchy, male dominance, capital--the masters. Shouldn't we begin to see that our lives are shaped not just from above, from the center, but also from below, from the margins, from all sides, by the relatively less powerful as well as the powerful? Our concentration on analyzing the center is an (unintentional) exercise in validating its power. We say we want to unmask and undo this power, but our attitude is that of a lover, our gaze cannot be torn from power's face.[38]

Reading The Bluest Eye we are compelled to focus our attention on the powerless. Morrison makes visible in The Bluest Eye aspects of working class, poor, black reality that can be found only in her work

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and the work of other black female writers. By her choice of subject matter she challenges the proponents of racist, sexist ideology who would render our reality invisible. Morrison fictionally exposes the participation of black people in the perpetuation of systems of domination and draws for readers a fictional portrait of the colonized. She aids colonized black females in the process of self-recovery by restoring to us neglected, lost, or forgotten parts of our social history, in so doing she creates an art that is, in her own words, both "uncompromisingly beautiful and socially responsible."

In keeping with her conviction that art can be socially responsible Morrison begins The Bluest Eye by focusing on reading as a force that shapes our perceptions of reality. Her concern with reading as a socially constructed process is evidenced by her self-conscious decision to begin the novel with a fictionalized version of a basic reader and by her decision to situate words on the page in such a way as to call attention to the typeset matter. Initially the emphasis on ways of seeing, on perception, is alluded to by the title itself, "The Bluest Eye." Significantly, Morrison's use of the singular eye places emphasis both on the eye as organ of sight and the "eye" that is the faculty of intellectual and aesthetic perception--as point of view, judgement. Preceded by the words "the bluest" the eye takes on the added significance of a transcendent vision. The superlative degree of comparison suggests the meaning to surpass, to go beyond, to transcend the reach of. A sense of transcendence is heightened by the coupling of the superlative degree with the word

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blue. Occultist S. G. J. Ouseley in his groundbreaking work Colour Meditations interprets the color blue as signifying human longing to transcend the material world:

> Blue is the colour from which the highest inspiration is born. Blue is not for the coarse, the sensual or the material minded. It belongs to the ethereal, spiritual natures, the darker shades especially denoting refinement and "higher thought."[39]

The title The Bluest Eye as introduction prepares readers for emphasis on ways of seeing throughout the novel. This emphasis on perception is intensified as the novel begins and readers visually confront the variation in typography. Readers are struck by the appearance of the typeset matter before reading a sentence. Thus the initial impact the novel has is potentially generated not by what is being said but by the way in which words are laid out on the page. By varying the typography Morrison compels readers to recognize that literature is shaped by the imagination and skill of the writer as well as the modes of production that bring the printed text into existence.

Her use of different typeset matter calls attention to the printing process, a process associated in Western culture with a separation of the senses, and an isolation of the visual sense. Marshall McLuhan documents the devastating impact the printing press has had on Western civilization in The Gutenberg Galaxy. McLuhan argues that "the alphabet is an aggressive and militant absorber and transformer of culture."[40] That aggressivity was made manifest as typography altered language from a means of perception and exploration to a portable commodity:

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> Printed books, themselves the first uniform, repeatable, and mass produced items in the world, provided endless paradigms of uniform commodity culture for sixteenth and succeeding centuries. . . .
> . . . Print, as it were, translated the dialgoue of shared discourse into packaged information or portable commodity. . . . It created the price system. For until commodities are uniform and repeatable the price of an article is subject to haggle and adjustment. The uniformity and repeatability of the book not only created modern markets but the price system inseparable from literacy and industry.[41]

It is the mass production of books McLuhan alludes to that led to the manufacture and distribution of standardized primers for the teaching of reading in public schools in the United States. Primers were used to teach students reading but they also taught them to perceive reality as uniform and static. Morrison re-captures the one dimensional focus of the basic reader in her single paragraph version of a "Dick and Jane" primer commonly used in public schools until recently. The word "primer" carries the root word "prime" which means to instruct beforehand. Morrison uses her version of the primer to instruct readers of The Bluest Eye encouraging us to examine our relationship to the printed word; to the form and content of literature; as well as the process by which we learned reading. She does this by using a technique Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky labeled "defamiliarization."[42] Outlining his aesthetic principles in the essay "Art as Technique" Shklovsky explains:

> Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. . . . And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects "unfamiliar," to make

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> forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself to be prolonged.[43]

"Defamiliarization" may occur when a writer uses a novel point of view, unusual word play, or figures of speech that heighten a reader's perception by making the familiar seem strange. Morrison relies on striking metaphors as a tool of defamiliarization. Her writing is consciously suggestive. She strives to imagine the unique gesture, statement, or disruptive image that will arouse or attract readers. She explains:

> You have to find the key, the clue. In language all you have are those 26 letters, some punctuation and some paper. So you have to do everything with just that.
> A metaphor is a way of seeing something, either familiar or unfamiliar, in a way that you can grasp it. If I get the right one, then I'm all right. But I can't just leap in with words, I have to get a hook. That's the way I think; I need it, the phrase or the picture or the word or some gesture.[44]

Beginning The Bluest Eye with a paragraph easily identifiable as a fictionalized version of a basic reader Morrison disrupts the notion that works of art appear in a vacuum. She relates the process of writing to those ways of learning to read that established the foundation of our perception of reality as well as our understanding of literary process. She reminds us that the work of art like the basic reader influences us, shapes our ideas, values, and actions. Morrison also demonstrates the self-conscious role of the writer in the creative process. Marxist literary critic Terry Eagleton places art within the complex structure of social perception within a given culture suggesting that we can only understand literature if we understand the total social

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process:

> Literary works are not mysteriously inspired, or explicable simply in terms of their author's psychology. They are forms of perception, particularly ways of seeing the world which is the 'social mentality' to ideology of an age. That ideology, in turn, is the product of the concrete social relations into which men enter at a particular time and place; it is the way those class relations are experienced, legitimized and perpetuated.[45]

Morrison cautions readers by reminding us that literature is part of a society's ideology. In particular the basic reader evokes the ideology of the middle-class in this society, specifically the white middle-class.

Her use of a fictionalized version of the reader calls attention to the relationship between the imagination and real life experience. The basic reader does not evoke a fictive reality readers can "escape" into; it engages us in a recollection of or a reflection upon the actual process by which we learned reading. To focus our attention on the basic reader paragraph Morrison repeats it three times. In the second and third version, she uses only one capital letter, drops all punctuation and runs words together. This forces readers to witness the destruction, rather, the dismantling of an established system of reading that provides us with standardized marks and signs that clarify meaning. Since that system of reading has had a political function, that of reinforcing and maintaining the values of the middle-class, Morrison metaphorically strips that class of its power to determine our perceptions of reality. Gradually (the dismantling process is done in stages), she weans us from our dependence on the

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one-dimensional perspective deeply engrained in our psyches since early childhood. Without punctuation, without spacing between lines, we must concentrate our attention on words. We must rely on our own ability to perceive without direction, or guidance. When we do this language functions for us as a means of perception. In this way Morrison restores to us the relationship to language which humans established prior to the invention of the printing press, while simultaneously deconstructing the notion that the printed word necessarily leads to an alienation from the visual sense.

Readers can comprehend the third paragraph only by isolating individual words visually and metanlly. In their introduction to a collection of essays on Russian Formalist Criticism, Lee Lemon and Marion Reis stress the importance of reader attention to words:

> When reading ordinary prose, we are likely to feel that something is wrong if we find ourselves noticing the individual words as words. The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice.[46]

Morrison never alters the content of the paragraph. Defamiliarization, induced by repetition, the variation in typeset matter, the absence of punctuation, calls attention to the one element of the paragraph that does not change, the content. Employing the technique of defamiliarization Morrison heightens our awareness of the text, enabling us to be conscious readers. Her use of the reader is not as one critic has suggested "unnecessary and unsubtle irony."[47] We learn from the content of the basic reader paragraph that little girls who want friends get their needs fulfilled and satisfied; we

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learn that childhood is a time of play. That reality will contrast sharply with the reality depicted in The Bluest Eye. The fictionalized version of the primer is a preface used by Morrison to engage fully and in a new way the attention of her readers. She presents the uniform orderly vision of reality conveyed in the content of the basis reader, deconstructs that vision, and by so doing prepares us for the different perspective on reality we will confront in The Bluest Eye.

Just as Morrison disrupts the order of the basic reader to emphasize that the static uniform reality it portrays is not the reality she will present, she disrupts conventional expectations about the way a novel should be written. After the fictionalized version of the primer she presents a general plot summary isolated from the main body of the novel. There is no clue in the plot summary to indicate the identity of the narrator. We must continue reading the novel to learn who is speaking and to discover detailed information about the events outlined in the summary.

The narrator of the plot summary begins with the seemingly innocent statement, "Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941."[48] Pointing to the time of World War II, the date is very significant. Just as the war was a gesture of imperialist struggle for world power, the marigolds are symbols of an earlier imperial conquest, the colonizing of North America. Marigolds were first brought to this country by European colonizers in 1573.[49] Their Latin name "calendula" means of the kalends, i.e. the first of every month. They are a perennial flower; it is this fact that makes their failure

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to grow noticeable. Although Claudia notices the absence of marigolds she is as unaware of their history as she is of the war that is taking place. Her social circumstances shape the nature and scope of her perception. Her world, her cosmos, is family, neighborhood, community. In the plot summary we learn about the planting of marigolds, their failure to grow. We learn about the death of Pecola's baby. In the last sentence we are told:

> There is really nothing more to say--except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.[50]

Again Morrison employs the technique of defamiliarization. Told in this solemn summary beginning that we will learn the "how" but not the "why." we then proceed to read a novel in which the why of everything is explained in minute detail.

The main body of the novel begins with a curious sentence:

> Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel.[51]

This sentence makes no rational sense. It is a deliberate attempt at paraodying the type of a sentence a naive reader might expect as a beginning to a novel. The images it evokes are fantastical disruptions of social order: nuns that walk quietly like lust, drunk men singing in the Greek hotel with sober eyes. Like a surrealist painting this opening statement attracts attention to itself. There is absolutely no connection between it and the naturalistic description of Claudia's reality that she proceeds to articulate. Its function is to increase reader awareness of the text. Like a slap in the face it wakes us up and compels us to pay closer attention to the novel.

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Here is Claudia's first sentence:

> Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father's cafe, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter.[52]

First, the name--names are very important in Morrison's fictional neighborhoods as they are in actual black communities. Critic Norris Clark highlights this feature of Morrison's work in the essay "Flying Black" stating that "names are to be remembered because they help to define who and what one is."[53] Contained in the last name Villanucci is the word villain, and that is exactly the way in which immigrant groups in American and black people related to one another--as enemies. Rosemary becomes the enemy of Claudia when she has material privilege, a place to live, a car (the date of which is important for it signifies that it is the latest model, nearly new), and the bread and butter, which both symbolizes absences of hunger as well as luxurious eating. At the very onset of the main body of the novel, we learn that the reality we have entered in contrast to the one described in the basic reader, or for that matter in the romantic novel that is alluded to by the opening sentence, is a world in which the needs of children like Claudia are not satisfied. Before the racial identify of Claudia is known it is obvious that she is one of the under-privileged, the poor.

For the poor childhood like adulthood is a time of struggle for material survival. After describing her envy of Rosemary Villanucci's material privilege Claudia describes going with Frieda and the grown-up to Zick's Coal Company to "fill burlap sacks with the tiny pieces of

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coal lying about."[54] I do not agree with Marxist critic Susan Willis' assertion that "unrepressed childhood" is evoked by Morrison as "a mode of existence prior to assimilation by bourgeois society."[55] There is no bourgeois society in The Bluest Eye, only a few individuals who are more well-to-do than their neighbors. However the exploitation and dehumanization that makes class privilege possible is all pervasive; it affects everyone, including the children. Among the oppressed classes childhood is a time of social awareness; children learn early various politics of domination. Claudia learns about systems of domination via repression within the family. Philosopher John Hodge in his book Cultural Bases of Racism and Group Oppression stresses that the traditional and legal structure of the Western family justifies the subjection of children to the authoritarian control of parents:

> It is this form of the family where most children first learn the meaning and practice of hierarchical, authoritarian rule. Here is where they learn to accept group oppression against themselves as non-adults, and where they learn to accept male supremacy and the group oppression of women. . . . Here is where the relationship of superordination-subordination, of superior-inferior, of master-slave is first learned and accepted as "natural."[56]

Authoritarian adult rule is the norm in Claudia's family. As subordinates she and Frieda are deprived of the freedom to speak directly to adults; they must wait until they are spoken to. Claudia outlines the form this domination takes: "Adults do not talk to us--they give us directions." Their status is the same as that of objects. When Mr. Henry the new roomer arrives, Claudia notes:

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> Frieda and I were not introduced to him--merely pointed out. Like, here is the bathroom; the clothes closet in here; and these are my kids, Frieda and Claudia; watch out for this window; it don't open all the way.[57]

Claudia and Frieda have one freedom and that is freedom of mind and imagination. They can think whatever they wish as long as they do not articulate their thoughts. This freedom exists because adults see childhood as a mindless state, that is why the children are seen as objects. It is also assumed that they lack will power. The creative defiant spirit that characterizes Claudia's inner self is continually repressed so as not to evoke the wrath of adults. Both girls demonstrate their awareness of the way adults perceive them and know they must camouflage and mask the existence of strong will, of their ability to act. When they decide to let the turnips burn yet make it appear accidental, we witness their exertion of will. In the presence of adults they make no gestures that would indicate assertion of power.

Claudia equates childhood with being an outsider. Adults are central to ongoing existence, and childhood places her and Frieda on the periphery of all social activity, in margins where they are usually ignored. She discovers in marginality a space for self-definition and empowerment:

> We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody, considered all speech a code to be broken by us and all gestures subject to careful analysis; we had become headstrong, devious, and arrogant. Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves. Our limitations were not known to us--not then. Our only handicap was our size; people gave us orders because they were bigger and stronger.[58]

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It is this power to define and shape their own destiny that society will seek to weaken and destroy. In The Bluest Eye it is not the white capitalist colonizers who subdue, subject, and conquer Claudia and Frieda but the already colonized black adults who mediate the relationship between the girls and the larger power structure. Even though Morrison acknowledges in the novel the existence of a white dominated capitalist superstructure, she portrays the way in which black people absorb the colonizing mentality and perpetuate systems of domination--classism, racism, and sexism; she does not, as many critics suggest, focus her attention on white racism.

The process by which the oppressed assume the mentality of their oppressors is outlined in Albert Memmi's book The Colonizer and the Colonized as a stage in the colonizing process. Like Morrison he sees adolescence as a period in which the possibility of revolt is strongest in the colonized, but the will to resist is diminished by educational systems that reinforce the colonizing mentality:

> Colonized society is a diseased society in which internal dynamics no longer succeed in creating new structures. It's century-hardened face has become nothing more than a mask under which it slowly smothers and dies. Such a society cannot resolve the conflict of generations, for it is unable to be transformed. The revolt of the adolescent colonized, far from resolving into mobility and social progress, can only sink into the morass of colonized society--unless there is a total revolution.[59]

It is Claudia who narrates her understanding of the process by which she has been taught to hate blackness and love whiteness. She eloquently narrates her resistance in her critique of commodity fetishism typified by the socialization to love white dolls. Yet she also narrates the failure of her resistance. She succumbs because

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the community does not support and encourage social deviance, especially in females.

In The Bluest Eye the community is the social organization individuals rely on for their collective survival. It is a class-stratified community. White immigrants are at the top of the hierarchy. They are the owners of businesses, the entrepreneurs. Like the black adults who mediate the relationship between children and the larger power structure, they mediate the relationship of the poor, underprivileged and the ruling class groups who control the means of production. They are represented by characters like Rosemary Villanucci whose father owns the cafe; by Mr. Yacobowski the owner of the Fresh Vegetable, Meat and Sundries store. Next on the hierarchy are the propertied aspiring-to-be middle-class blacks represented by Geraldine, her husband, and their son Louis Junior. Middle-class women are primary consumers in capitalist society and they are portrayed by Morrison as a group that wholeheartedly embraces bourgeois ideology. Black middle-class women like Geraldine imitate as best they can the white middle class. Morrison takes great care in her description of this group:

> They go to land-grant colleges, normal school, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement; home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart; how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotion.

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> Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. The laught that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair.[60]

The MacTeers are lower black middle class; they own an old house but are compelled to take in a roomer to make ends meet. The Breedloves are working-class renters. At the very bottom of the hierarchy are the prostitutes who are also renters.

Ironically within this community the only place where systems of domination do not alter the nature of human relationships in a negative way is in the household of the three prostitutes, Poland, China, and Miss Marie. Whereas poverty deprives the Breedloves of their capacity to experience pleasure so overwhelming is their longing for material abundance, their "dreams of affluence," the three prostitutes find in their poverty a space in which they can create an alternative social reality. In The Bluest Eye Morrison suggests that women are the truly creative thinkers in the area of social organization. This is especially true of the three prostitutes; they are Morrison's "good" women, not the women who are wives and mothers. The three prostitutes live in a communal environment, a world devoid of the traditional patriarchal family--the primary social institution which affirms and perpetuates systems of domination. Like many modern day radical feminists, they protect themselves from assaults by sexist men by bonding together. They defend themselves emotionally by hating all men:

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> Except for Marie's fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever--all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. On one occasion the town well knew, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window.[61]

In their apartment there is none of the violence, self-hatred, emotional alienation, and persecution of one another that abounds in other households described in The Blues Eye.

Morrison shows via her characterization of the prostitutes that it is not solely poverty that has caused the demoralization and dehumanization of the Breedlove family; it is also the Breedlove's passive absorption of the colonizing mentality. They surrender their power to be self-defining. The three prostitutes, China, Poland, and Miss Marie, are self-defining. They create their own unique social reality. Song, story telling, and sensual experience are the ways they protect themselves against an onslaught of depression and alienation. Susan Willis designates the prostitutes as Morrison's fictional portrayal of an emergent alternative social reality:

> When this happens, "otherness" no longer functions as an extension of domination (as it does when blackness is beheld from the point of view of racist bourgeois society, or when the crippled, blind, and deformed are compared to the terrorizing totality of a whole, and therefore, "perfect" body). Rather, the space created by otherness permits a reversal of domination and transforms what was once perceived from without as "other" into the explosive image of a utopian mode.[62]

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Through their spinning of fantastical tales and their singing of songs they display an unrepressed creativity and an unbridled imagination; this is the freedom of mind necessary for the inventing of new reality principles. Radical lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich describes this freedom of mind as a necessary characteristic for those who would create new worlds in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision":

> . . . Moreover, if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives, perhaps to the very life you are living at that moment. You have to be free to play around with the notion that day might be night, love might be hate; nothing can be too sacred for the imagination to turn into its opposite or to call experimentally by another name.[63]

Describing China, Poland, and Miss Marie, Morrison self-consciously separates her novel, her images of prostitutes from those that commonly abound in Western literature:

> Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans. Amused by a long-ago time of ignorance. They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their "understanding." Nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate an outward brittleness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things and could make the right man happy. Neither were they the sloppy, inadequate whores who, unable to make a living at it alone, turn to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction, avoiding suicide only to punish the memory of some absent father or to sustain the misery of some silent mother.[64]

Morrison's prostitutes are happy, contented, fulfilled women; they neither bemoan their fate nor spend their time dreaming of other

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possibilities. They take each moment as it comes and endeavor to draw the maximum degree of enjoyment out of the most trivial day to day activity. For Poland, that activity is ironing, for China it is curling her hair, and for Miss Marie it is eating.

In the alternative social reality they develop there is a change in what words signify. Miss Marie substitutes the word love for lost:

> Whenever something was missing, Marie attributed its disappearance to "something in the house that loved it." There is somethin' in this house that loves brassieres," she would say with alarm.[65]

However that reality has no impact on the larger community. In fact they are denied full participation in the community because of their lifestyle. Their "utopia" is confined to the interior world of their apartment. They avoid contact with the world outside. Even though they go to the MacTeer household together to engage in sexual play with Mr. Henry they rush to leave before any family member returns home. When Claudia and Frieda come to the storefront looking for Pecola and Marie invites them to enter that alternative world, they refuse. Their parents have taught them to dread and fear difference. Annoyed by their refusal to enter the apartment, Marie resorts to throwing a bottle at the girls; the glass that shatters around them evokes the fragility and impossibility of realizing the utopian vision. This small aggressive act suggests the dilemmas the prostitutes would face were they to attempt to share their new world vision with the community.

Void of all signs of life, the Breedlove household contrasts sharply with the vibrant, sensual world that exists in the upper

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apartment. Even the names of the inhabitants of the upper rooms suggest their specialness--China, Poland, Miss Marie (nicknamed Maginot Line). They evoke the spirit of those countries who were trying to resist imperialism and struggling to preserve their unique social realities. By contrast the Breedlove surname suggests that period of early North American history when names signified one's function or work within society. In the essay "Black Entitles: Names As Symbols in Afro-American Literature" Lloyd Brown suggests that the black American retentive link to an African cultural legacy encouraged choosing of names that reflect "the interpenetration of personality and environment."[66] Particularly Brown argues, names in African-American Literature are indiciation of "the peculiar historical and social reality that have dominated the Negro's search for identity."[67] The word "breedlove" is also the statement of an imperative, a command. Within the African-American historical context the word "breed" evokes memories of the forced breeding of enslaved black people by white owners to produce a new group of unpaid laborers for the colonial work force. Breeding was the ultimate act of dehumanization and exploitation. Unlike the black people who had been brought from Africa as slaves, most of whom were adults, the children born into slavery would never know any reality other than that from birth until death. On most farms and plantations the term "breeding" had usually been reserved for descriptions of forced matings of animals to increase. The coupling of the word "breed" with the word "love" is a contradiction. It is precisely the dehumanizing act of making people function as "things" and "objects" that destroys their capacity to love. This is the case

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with the Breedlove family.

Morrison begins the chapter focusing on the Breedloves by describing the various inhabitants who have resided in the then "abandoned store." She provides a social history of the building. Susan Willis comments on the peculiar way in which "things" in The Bluest Eye embody the past:

> In Morrison, everything is historical. Objects, too are embedded in history and are the bearers of the past. For those characters closest to the white bourgeois world objects contain the residues of repressed and unrealized desires.[68]

The abandoned store is desolate and ugly like the lives of the people who have lived in it. In the period of economic advancement and industrial growth which is spanned in the novel, the latter part of the 1930's and the early part of the 1940's, sustained ties between people were impossible hence the building does not evoke memories of such ties. Constructed by a first generation Greek landlord the living quarters are an expression of the immigrant desire for social mobility. The architectural arrangements of the living quarters make it a place suitable only for those who are in states of transition. Lack of facilities for bathing indicate that the storefront is a place designed for inhabitants who plan to move on.

Like the building, the material belongings of the Breedloves evoke the alienation created by capitalism and a consumer economy wherein individuals are denied access to or control over the means of production. The furnishings reflect the social circumstance and psychic states of their owners as well as those of the manufacturers

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and distributors of the products. "Conceived, manufactured, shipped and sold in various states of thoughtlessness, greed, and indifference,"[69] the furnishings in no way enhance the life of the Breedloves. The description of the sofa which, though arriving damaged, must still be paid for monthly, graphically depicts their powerlessness:

> . . . You could hate a sofa. But it didn't matter. You still had to get together $4.80 a month. If you had to pay $4.80 for a sofa that started off split, no good, and humiliating--you couldn't take any joy in owning it. And the joylessness stank, pervading everything. The stink of it kept you from painting the beaverboard walls, from getting a matching piece of material for the chair; even from sewing up the split, which became a gash, which became a gaping shasm that exposed the cheap frame and cheaper upholstery. It withheld the refreshment in a sleep slept on it. It imposed a furtiveness on the loving done on it. Like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body--making breathing difficult, vision limited, nerves unsettled, so a hated piece of furniture produces a fretful malaise that asserts itself throughout the house and limits the delight of things related to it.[70]

Morrison concentrates first on the economic forces that have shaped the Breedlove family; then she focuses on their poverty of spirit, their lack of will power and drive. That lack, she suggests, is created by their passive absorption of the values of the dominant group which sees them as unworthy of respect, as valueless. A mark of the intensity of their inner psychic state is their obsession with what they take to be their ugliness. Their willingness to assume the negative identity projected onto them by their oppressors is an acquiescence that Morrison suggests cannot be viewed as a response that makes them blameless; they are responsible in that they are complicit in their victimization:

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> It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said, "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it.[71]

The expression of anger is one gesture that affirms Pecola, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove's senses of self. Anger, according to Peter Lyman can have positive implications as a means of self-assertion:

> Anger is a response to a sense of violation; it is the emotion that guards the domain of the self and of that which the self cares for. Anger is by its very nature a self-regarding emotion; it is incapable of objectivity or being disinterested.[72]

Pecola's anger at the white storekeeper's refusal to acknowledge her existence is a self-protecting positive anger and she feels empowered by it:

> Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and a presence.[73]

These feelings of anger momentarily enable Pecola to resist degradation, but she cannot sustain them. The anger that Cholly and Pauline assert is not a positive anger. Because it has been internalized it erupts into violent destructive behavior, becoming the force by which they subdue, humiliate, and conquer one another. Lyman places this kind of anger in a special category:

> Nietzsche defines anger as the pathos of subordination, and argues that rage may lead beyond angry speech and aggressive action to a self-destructive adaptation to subordination through the internalization of rage. He

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> calls this silent rage ressentiment, and argues that it is the dominant political emotion of modernity. Ressentiment is literally a political neurosis; like a neurosis, the past becomes a trauma that dominates the present and future, for every event recapitulates, the unresolved injury. Speech and action to change the future are impossible, because memory is incomplete for the wounded ego that refuses to remember the trauma and surrender; thus the victim cannot learn from the past, only suffer it.[74]

Cholly and Pauline suffer as a result of their inability to resolve past hurt.

Pauline perceives the loss of her front tooth, and the migration from the rural south where she felt at home to the alienated industrial midwest, to be the experiences which strip her of self-worth. The technological world of motion pictures completely deprives her of any need to be self-defining. She is given an identity by the images portrayed on the movie screen. In contrast to the rural environment where the deformed foot can in some ways enhance her selfhood, within the advanced technological world "handicaps" like Pauline's are tragic flaws. Although she defines the reason for her loss of self-esteem, the narrator places responsibility on two pervasive evils in Western society; the idea of romantic love and physical beauty. Both are taught to Pauline by the film industry. Morrison criticizes the obsession with beauty in Western culture in several essays. Writing about the slogan "black is beautiful," she questions the emphasis on beauty by both blacks and whites in this society:

> When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble. I remember a white man saying to me that the killing of so many Vietnamese was "of course wrong, but worse was the fact, they are so beautiful." I don't know if there is a white mind; if

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> there is--that is it. "Too bad such beautiful people had to die." A mere question of aesthetics! Yes, we too are beautiful, but the phrase evaded the issue and our plight by being a reaction to a white idea, which means it was a white idea turned inside out, and a white idea turned inside out is still a white idea. The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, or future. . . . The point about concentrating on whether we are beautiful is that it is a concentration on a way of measuring worth that is wholly trivial and wholly white, and preoccupation with it is an irrevocable slavery of the senses.[75]

Pauline becomes addicted to the images that appear on the movie screen and strives to change her appearance so that she will look like white movie starts. Enraptured by film fantasies she loses the capacity to recognize true beauty, beauty that is not artificial and manufactured. So obsessed is she with the black and white images on the screen that she also loses the ability to experience color as a sensual pleasure and joy in life. In the rural south her senses are engaged by the beauty of nature--an engagement that is charged with vivid colors associated with pleasurable experiences.

Just as Claudia derives pleasure from the natural world prior to the repression imposed upon her by adult rule, Pauline recalls her life in the south as a time when she was in touch with nature and felt a sense of harmony and well-being. That sense is expressed in her love of the rainbow symbol and her love of color. Color, for Pauline, and other characters in The Bluest Eye is a cosmic force transmitting life-affirming energy. Occultists and color scientists have tried to demonstrate scientifically that color affects the human psyche. They

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have proven its ability to transform emotions as well as aid in the healing of mental and physical disorders. As Ouseley argues:

> In the truest sense of the word. Colour is life. The splendid symphony of colour which we see manifested on all sides of the Universe is the visible expression of Divine Mind.[76]

Initially, Pauline replaces this absence of color in her life with the sterile black and white images of the movies. Color is associated with sexual potency. It is during coitus, at the peak of orgasm, that Pauline remembers colors:

> I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up in me. That streak of green from the June-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs. Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come, and afraid I won't. But I know I will, and I do. And it be rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts.[77]

Her fascination with the movies represses this sensuality and her ability to feel sexual desire.

Cholly Breedlove is also able to experience joy in color and nature prior to his move to the midwest. The color blue is associated with his experience of happiness as a young man. His special father figure friend is Blue Jack with whom he shares one of his happiest moments having watermelon under a "bright blue sky." As the watermelon blots out the sun, Cholly feels for the first time that blackness is a wonderful pleasing color. For one single solitary moment he is able to imagine the possibility that God is black. He stops himself:

> No, God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It

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> must be the devil who looks like that--holding the world in his hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm, insides. If the devil did look like that he preferred him. He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him.[78]

Like Pauline, Cholly loses touch with his capacity to feel pleasure. The two traumatic events associated with his feelings of self-hatred occur when the white males confront him and Darlene while they are engaged in their first experience of lovemaking and compel them to re-enact the experience while they watch. The other experience occurs when he finds his father only to be rejected by him. Both experiences subject Cholly to a form of psychological castration. Not knowing the identity of his father Cholly cannot feel rooted or grounded in the world. He desperately needs to feel a biological connection; one that will restore to him a sense of potency and provide an ancestral legacy that will help him define himself. Searching for his father after he and Darlene have been psychically violated by the white male voyeurs he seems to believe that the sexual potency he loses when commanded by the white men to "get on wid it" will be restored to him once he makes a connection with his father. Meeting Samson Fuller (after his grandmother has warned him that no one by that name will come to a good end) he suffers yet another humiliation:

> There was his father, a man like any other man, but there indeed were his eyes, his mouth, his whole head. His shoulders lurked beneath that jacket, his voice, his hands--all real. They existed, really existed somewhere. Right here. Cholly had always thought of his father as a giant of a man, so when he was very close it was with a shock that he discovered he was taller than his father. In fact,

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> he was staring at a balding spot on his father's head, which he suddenly wanted to stroke. While thus fascinated by the pitiable clean space hedged around by neglected tufts of wool, the man turned a hard belligerent face to him.
>
> "What you want, boy?"
>
> "Who sent you?"
>
> "Huh?"
>
> "You Melba's boy?"
>
> "No, sir, I'm . . . " Cholly blinked. He could not remember his mother's name. Had he ever known it? What could he say. Whose boy was he? He couldn't say, "I'm your boy." That sounded disrespectful.
>
> The man was impatient. "Something wrong with your head? Who told you to come after me."[79]

This frustrating frightening encounter ends when Samson Fully shouts at Cholly, "Tell that bitch she get her money. Now, get the fuck outta my face! of ~~here~~." Rejected, Cholly ~~wets~~ shits his pants. It is a pathetic response to a situation that leaves him shattered emotionally, his body permeated with pain. Temporarily he is like a baby again. Hiding in the bushes his sense of well-being returns only when he remembers the tender loving care his Great Aunt Jimmy has shown towards him.

Aunt Jimmy and older black women like her are important characters in The Bluest Eye because they have managed to survive emotionally whole despite the oppresion and personal degradation that they endure. Morrison's description of their social history is one of the tender moments in the novel and it is often ignored by readers who do not notice the positive images so preoccupied are they with the descriptions of pain and hardship. Morrison's portrait of the older Southern black women enhances our awareness of the legacy Pauline and Cholly lose when they leave the South:

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> But they had been young once. The odor of their armpits and haunches had mingled into a lovely musk; their eyes had been furtive, their lips relaxed, and the delicate turn of their heads on those slim black necks had been like nothing other than a doe's. Their laughter had been more touch than sound.
>
> Then they had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of childens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence--and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And the difference was all the difference there was.[80]

These black women, like the three prostitutes, attest to the ability of women to reorganize society, to achieve wholeness within a social matrix where even the privileged lack the pscyhological know-how to experience such harmony and peace of mind. In their old age, Morrison says:

> They were, in fact and at last, free. And the lives of these black women were synthesized in their eyes--a purée of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy.[81]

Aging for these women, as Morrison describes it, is more a time of celebration, than a time of waning energy; it culminates with the death of Aunt Jimmy, which is also an occasion for celebration:

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> The funeral banquet was a peal of joy after the thunderous beauty of the funeral. It was like a street tragedy with spontaneity tucked softly into the corners of a highly formal structure. The deceased was the tragic hero, the survivors the innocent victims; there was the omnipresence of the deity, strophe and antistrophe of the chorus of mourners led by the preacher. There was grief over the waste of life, the stunned wonder at the ways of God, and the restoration of order in nature at the graveyard.[82]

Morrison's portrait of these rural black women in Georgia like her emphasis on Pauline's contact with nature, highlights a pre-capitalist mode of existence. As Raymond Williams suggests in The Country and The City, the contrast of the rural experience with the urban "is one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crisis of our society."[83] Morrison's city characters suffer an alienation from the senses and from nature that is devastating. Cholly's work in the steel mills in Ohio severs completely any connection he has had with nature. Writing about D. H. Lawrence's The Rainbow Williams emphasizes that the movement from country to city leads to a crisis in consciousness. This is certainly so for Morrison's characters William's analysis of The Raimbow could be easily apllied to The Bluest Eye with one difference: Lawrence equates working the land with male sexual imagery while for Morrison it is female. According to Williams, Lawrence saw farming life as "a metaphor given historical standing, for a particular kind of being; active, physical, unconscious: the body as opposed to the mind; inseparable from the processes of nature."[84] This metaphor works for Morrison. Its effectiveness is enhanced by her association of the

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nurturing black female with perfect union with nature. Morrison's aged black women seem to be almost an extension of nature, a root from the earth assuming a human form. They evoke the female power that feminists today associate with ancient, archaic societies where women were goddesses and the divine mother was Wisdom.

Bereft of the love and care of his Aunt Jimmy, Cholly loses his slim hold on life. Like Pauline he escapes into a fantasy world, a bizarre reality he constructs by committing outrageous violent acts. Pauline surrenders her fantasy life to assume total responsibility for the material survival of the family. Cholly's addiction to alcohol enhances his lapse into fantasy. His perception of reality is completely distorted when he violently rapes Pecola with utter emotional detachment. His schizophrenic mental state is evident by the discontinuity between his thoughts and his actions; he thinks tender caring thoughts about Pecola as he brutally and violently rapes her. At times the narration of the rape scene deflects attention away from the violence. Morrison's language eroticizes the assault:

> The tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours towards her, he raised his hand and caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling. He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes letting his fingers sink into her waist. The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been.[85]

Clearly the narrator intends readers to be sympathetic towards Cholly, for she explains in great detail the past life of degradation and

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humiliation that are meant to serve as the explanation, if not the justification, for his actions. She is primarily concerned with conveying Cholly's feelings. However the image of the unconscious little girl raped and left on the kitchen floor counteract to some extent the eroticization of the act itself. In an interview Morrison, herself, has emphasized her difficulty imagining violent acts she has not experienced: "I've never been raped, and I don't know what it feels like . . ."[86] Cholly as rapist feels the same type of positive sexual feelings that he experienced when he first fell in love with Pauline which shows he has no awareness of the extreme violence he is perpetrating.

Morrison places Cholly Breedlove's incest-rape within the context of a troubled family situation. The incest-rape if portrayed cinematically would show the image of Pauline transposed over the face of Pecola. Her gesture with her foot reminds Cholly of the gestures Pauline made with her foot when they first met. The rape occurs when Pecola is performing household tasks, chores Pauline has abandoned. Throughout the rape Pecola is completely passive, fulfilling the traditional sex stereotype of woman's role. Claudia interprets the rape as a perverted gesture of love:

> And Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death.[87]

All the prominent male characters in The Bluest Eye sexually abuse young girls. Mr. Henry, the MacTeer roomer, is forcefully

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evicted for sexually assaulting Frieda. Soaphead Church lusts after the bodies of young girls, lures them to his room, and sexually abuses them. Neither providers or protectors Cholly, Soaphead, and Mr. Henry fail to conform to the sex stereotyped male and it is only in relationship to young girls that they can assert masculine dominance. When Cholly rapes Pecola, he acknowledges that he finds her utter passivity exciting, more pleasurable than the mutually reciprocal sexual lovemaking he has shared with Pauline. The colonization process destroys the possibility of mutual intimacy between women and men as it prioritizes dominance.

Soaphead Church who epitomizes "sick" perverted masculinity has all the negative characteristics of the colonizers. He has experienced a childhood where he has suffered physical abuse and is as psychologically disturbed as Cholly Breedlove. As the male counterpart to the middle-class Geraldine he is another example of the corrupt aspiring black bourgeoisie. Educated and from a background where he has been taught to be an Anglophile as well as to believe in his superiority to dark-skinned people he enters the black community only to take advantage of the inhabitants. As with all the other characters portrayed in the novel an explanation is given for his failings: the desertion of Velma, the wife of his youth. Male characters consistently scapegoat females blaming them for their inadequacies, their perversions, their inability to function emotionally. Soaphead imagines that his young wife will fulfill the nurturing role designated a female function within sexist society. Velma is to him not someone with whom he will have a reciprocal relationship but someone who will satisfy his needs:

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> She was to have been the answer to his unstated, unacknowledged question--where was the life to counter the encroaching nonlife? Velma was to rescue him from the nonlife he had learned on the flat side of his father's belt. But he resisted her with such skill that she was finally driven out to escape the inevitable boredom produced by such a dainty life.[88]

It is Soaphead who exploits Pecola's longing for blue eyes to satisfy his desire to kill the dog. Unknowingly she feeds the poison to the animal passively witnessing his agonizing death.

Convinced of his superiority and consumed with hatred for other humans, Soaphead identifies with God. In fact, through his letter to God he announces his superiority, and his belief that he would do a better job of being "god." Admonishing God for not fulfilling his own commandments, Soaphead writes:

> That's why I changed the little black girl's eyes for her, and I didn't touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her the eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show!
>
> I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But <u>she</u> will. And she will live happily ever after. I have found it meet and right so to do.[89]

In his frustrated unresolved masculinity, his unfulfilled quest for identity Soaphead knowingly leads Pecola into madness. Her madness mirrors his own psychic condition; he succeeds in the determination that one female will allow her destiny to be shaped by him. Unlike Velma, who escapes the insanity Soaphead would have forced her towards, Pecola's innocence makes her a willing victim.

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In The Bluest Eye the model of colonization with its oppressor-oppressed structure becomes the model for all human relationships. Soaphead, with all his family background and education, is still one of the colonized, and it is in her portrait of him that Morrison clearly identifies the colonial model as the matrix around which all human relationships are formed. Identifying himself, he states:

> We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. In retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure and thought recklessness was freedom. We raised our children and reared our crops; we let infants grow and property develop. Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence. And the smell of your fruit and the labor of your days we abhorred.[90]

Failing in his ability to sustain a relationship with a woman who acquiesces, Soaphead must derive his feeling of power over females by abusing young girls.

Within patriarchal society many men cannot function sexually unless they are in a dominant relationship to women. So it is with male characters in The Bluest Eye. Adult women in the novel are all assertive and do not conform to conventional stereotypes of female roles. Only young adolescent girls are in awe of male authority, passive in relationship to men. Claudia's awe and admiration of conventional masculinity is expressed in her description of her father, the one male in the novel who is both protector and provider:

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> My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, sheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked day and night to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames, he gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat, lays kindling by, discusses qualities of cold, and teaches us how to rake, feed, and bank the fire. And he will not unrazor his lips until spring.[91]

Awed by masculinity, Claudia insists that Cholly's rape of Pecola is a gesture of affection, though misguided. She also says of Mr. Henry:

> We loved him. Even after what came later, there was no bitterness in our memory of him.[92]

Deprived of attention and positive affirmation from adults, all the young girls in the novel, with the exception of Maureen Peal, are vulnerable to exploitation by males who give affection and show interest as a prelude to sexual abuse.

Even male children are depicted as abusive towards females, learning early to assert dominance via violence. They too scapegoat females. When a group of black boys surround Pecola they glory in their power to incite fear and terror. Inventing a rhyme to torment "they gaily harassed her":

> They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned

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> self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds--cooled--and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.[93]

Scapegoating females, males are able to feel good about themselves and one another. Another example of male children assaulting female children occurs with Louis Junior and Pecola. Louis Junior throws a cat in Pecola's face and delights in her terror. The cat is the beloved pet of his mother and by destroying it, he is able to revenge himself on her for failing to satisfy his need for love and affection. However, this revenge is compounded when he blames Pecola and she is punished by Geraldine. To Geraldine Pecola represents the masses of poor black women with whom she does not wish to identify. Attacking her she attacks her own past, revealing her hatred for all black people.

Pecola as scapegoat par excellence seems to be more a symbolic figure than a character intended to evoke a lifelike personality. Her name, which would be considered a made-up name in the black community, hints at the desire to transcend the ordinary that is central to her psyche. Pecola is more vulnerable than any of the other young girls in The Bluest Eye because she lacks self-consciousness. Unlike Claudia, who has an older sister to initiate her into new realms of experience, Pecola is alone. She enters the hierarchical world of the MacTeer family as a "case"--an outcast belonging to no place and no one. Claudia emphatically voices her fear of being outcast, a condition symbolized for her by having no place to live because family has put you "outdoors":

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