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English 369: Toni Morrison

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The Blues, Birds, and Burdens of *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* was delayed in its development and did not come to fruition until its subsequent publication when Morrison was 39 years old. Her motivation for the novel stemmed from her desire for stories about the black perspective, especially the perspective of young black girls. As quoted in an interview with Mavis Nicolason from 1988, "[i]t was like a long reading exercise. It took five years, so when I would read it and didn't like it, I would change it a bit" (*Mavis on Four, Toni Morrison interview*, 1988). The story is told from the perspectives of both Claudia MacTear and her younger self and centralizes its narrative around her family and Pecola Breedlove, a young girl from a broken home. Throughout the novel, readers gain insight into the turmoil within and between families, the social dynamics between children and authority figures, and the human condition of the young black girls. This paper aims to analyze the specific language and formatting used in the *Dick and Jane* readers, along with specific quotes from the text containing motifs of birds and the color blue as well as themes such as beauty, war, and community. These components together built the internal regulations and restrictions taught to Pecola by the Breedlove family to mold herself into white beauty standards, compare family dynamics, and contrast what she lacks to what she never will achieve.

While seemingly wholesome at first, the use of *Dick and Jane* readers as an introduction and chapter marker contrast the ideals of white suburbia with the Black realities of the Mactear and Breedlove families. First published in 1930, *Dick and Jane* was a project aimed at teaching children to read that continued until 1965, gaining popularity in the 1950s (*Shermer*). *Dick and*

Jane marked an important turning point in education within classrooms in the United States; priorly, children were taught to read using complex texts like the Bible. The downfall of these readers is found in the display of the nuclear family. Highlighted within an article written by Werrelin T. Debra, “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in the Bluest Eye”, in 2005:

... Morrison suggests that, from their inception, Elson-Gray primers participated in a national illiteracy campaign that systematically disenfranchised young black Americans, especially young black girls... Morrison's critique suggests yet another way that histories of discrimination might interfere with a family's ability to protect or empower its children. (Debra 62)

The content within the story provided by *Dick and Jane* is quite simple because of its intended audience. However, “Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy,” provides a very polished view of what one looks like or should emulate, as touched upon within the course. Using these excerpts, Morrison highlights that the intended and primed audience taught literacy not only as a symbol of race but also a symbol of class. A white housewife does not worry about money since her husband provides for her. The white father is strong and smiles, because he is secure in his place in life and in society. Their white children are allowed to rejoice in their innocence without worry, because they are protected by parental figures and a world that bends to their needs.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the same story is repeated three times, and as it is repeated, the text itself loses punctuation, text sizes get smaller, and words are pushed closer together until they are nearly unrecognizable. Such a display of text when read out loud sounds eerily similar to patterns of speech mimicked in panic attacks, ruminating on something traumatic that happened

previously. There is a sense of short and slow detachment from the world and oneself as the words become smaller, as Pecola did throughout the novel. This reduction of character is most evident on pages 45 to 46, when Pecola is determined to make herself disappear and is nearly successful, except for her eyes holding her back. The easy repetition and sentence structure found in the *Dick and Jane* readers can be seen in the chat she tells herself: “Pretty eyes. Pretty Blue Eyes, Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes, Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four Blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes... Moring-glory-blue-eyes,” (Morrison, 46). Combining the sentence structure from the *Dick and Jane* readers with Pecola’s fixation on blue eyes was an extremely powerful and purposeful choice done by Morrison. Through using a reader primed for young white children, Pecola is not only learning in a context in which she is not included but is also using the basic structure of said primer; she makes up sing-song daydreams about her self-induced-hatred. The use of em dashes in “blue-sky eyes” and “moring-glory-blue-eyes” creates phonetic emphasis on the words, in a strung-along manner. Morning glory is a hardy vine flower originally from South America that has multiple meanings: unrequited love, morality of life, love that is in vain, and restricted love (*Morning glory flower meaning*). Keeping this in mind, the morning glory flower within this context can showcase the lack of morality of life around Pecola and the unrequited love she has been subject to from her mother and father. While the names, Jerry and Alice, are not the same as Dick and Jane, it is interesting that Jerry is shortened to jip considering the common meaning of jerry is in reference to a German or Germans collectively (*JERRY definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary*). Additionally, the name Alice is from a Germanic word meaning “of noble rank” (*Alice definition and meaning | Collins English dictionary*). These name choices, while famously known from

children's media like Tom and Jerry or Alice in Wonderland, hold a connection to World War II and the ethnic cleansing of multiple communities in the shadows of the novel. This nod to the historical backdrop and children's media joins the long list of restrictions to which Pecola is subject.

Through the use of this formative emphasis, Morrison is not only shaming the marketable version of family presented in the *Dick and Jane* readers, however, she uses the misshaping to mimic the unfortunate outcome Pecola faced at the end of the novel. Such is seen through Morrison's use of birdlike descriptions of "Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach-could not even see-but which filled the valleys of the mind," (Morrison 204). The zoomorphism within this quote takes a step further beyond simply dehumanizing Pecola. The "beating the air, a winged but grounded bird" characterizes her as not only disabled but violent through the use of "beating" and juxtaposition of "winged but grounded,". She is an anomaly within this form, unlike other birds, and is outcasted for such. The specific choice of a bird, rather than a more powerful animal like a lion, is prevalent in the theme of freedom within the novel and the great costs that come with its power. Pecola is "intent on the blue void it could not reach" ; under this veiled false freedom, she has no control over her life or mind yet still seems to persevere despite all odds. While equipped with the tools necessary for freedom , her fate, "which filled the valleys of the mind," is ultimately handicapped not only by the treatment she receives from her family but also by the community for incestuous rape. This chained freedom at the expense of her life, sanity, and connections around her creates a box of social stigma from which she is confined by ideas of beauty she will never subscribe to, family she lost through time and trauma, and her incapacity to achieve recognized freedom. The hand at which her parents, Cholly and Pauline, play in this is equally heavy and unforgiving.

Rather than being a father figure that provides, Cholly's world since birth is marked with abandonment and powerlessness, which then turns him into an unstable and violent person with a history of sexual abuse. His lack of a "traditional" upbringing, alongside a lack of stability, left him awkward and avoidant regarding how and where to start leading and nurturing his own children. This neglect is highlighted by the "had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen... he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children," (Morrison 160-161). Cholly, seemingly born without the right tools, cannot express love in a positive manner, and when viewing both his failures and similarities to him within his children, he feels "revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence," (Morrison 161). Within this quote, Cholly's first instinct is to react to the situation rather than responding, showcasing his habits of being quick to anger. His "revulsion" is not only an emotional distancing from Pecola but from the traits he sees passed down from him to her. This scene of withdrawal is then met with a large swing of emotion and memory in combating the guilt and pity he feels, leading to her rape: "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her," (Morrison 163). The mundaneness of such extreme emotions showcases how normalized this has become for Cholly, a routine for him in a sense. The personification of hatred and tenderness within the quote acts similarly to a devil and angel on one's shoulder. Hatred forces him to leave her cold and without the soft touch of a father, which he is incapable of doing. Tenderness, better described as shame, compels him to cover up his unjust undoing of her. The act of rape within this scene is not about lust or pleasure; rather, it is about Cholly's power over Pecola's body. He sees her body as "young, helpless, hopeless," (Morrison 161) alongside similarities to her mother and misdirected grotesque lust for a memory of Pauline, mimicked within Pecola's habits.

Unlike the polished matriarchal figure displayed, Pauline is not only physically disfigured by her lack of teeth and limp, but also neglects her home and children in taking care of the white house and family she works for. Furthermore, the hardness she has towards her children is highlighted in a monologue: “Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by god, fear of madness like Cholly’s Mother,” (Morrison 128). Within the excerpt, the use of the word respectability refers to the social guidelines and power Pauline gains in proximity to the white family she serves at her daytime job, teaching her children submission and compliance. Additionally, it could be used to describe the detail and strictness of her habits within the home as a soldier on the field. Assessing situations, following orders, and adhering to strict social and institutional regulation. The use of “bent” in this excerpt’s response is used in a manner similar to military or combative training, as a nod to the wartime setting within the background. Pauline, a general, must bend new recruits, her children, for better control and submission. Pauline instills fear into her children through her own personal fears, such as not being loved by God, her insecurities, and Cholly’s hereditary misfortunes. Together, Pauline and Cholly prove to be a blemish on American Familial tropes, as well as a cyclical cycle, passing down such traumas, insecurities, and strained relationships to their own children due to a lack of nurturing early on.

Morrison closes *The Bluest Eye* by unraveling both language and identity, where Pecola’s fragmented voice mirrors the distorted world that shaped her. The orderly rhythm of the *Dick and Jane* readers collapses into incoherence, reflecting how the polished ideals of family and beauty disintegrate when measured against the realities of the Breedloves. Through this fragmentation, Morrison transforms language into reflecting broken sentences and repeated words echoing Pecola’s descent into invisibility. The birdlike imagery that threads through the novel “a winged

but grounded bird” returns in the end as a symbol of stifled flight, capturing the futility of Pecola’s longing for freedom through blue eyes that promise sight but deliver blindness. Pauline and Cholly’s warped understandings of love and respectability, shaped by absence and shame, further enclose her within the confines of their own burdens. Morrison’s deliberate collapse of form becomes its own kind of storytelling, one where beauty and ruin share the same bed. The novel does not conclude with redemption but with reverberation, a lingering ache carried through the blues, birds, and bygones that remain. Morrison leaves her readers not with a lesson but with an echo, the echo of a child’s voice fading into a world that taught her to disappear.

Dear Professor Brown,

Thank you for the opportunity and feedback on my paper, previously labeled “The Violence of White Figures in *The Bluest Eye*” to now “The Blues, Birds, and Burdens of *The Bluest Eye*.” I chose to change the name of the paper to better suit the analysis as I shifted from focusing on external factors of society to internal ones within the novel. The comments I received stemmed mainly from a lack of in-depth analysis of the text as well as analysis that used a more sociological view, quotes and analysis touched upon within class discussions, and general typos. I made sure to have Vanessa Manning, a WA, proofread the paper as I have a learning disability and cannot always correctly discern what is good or illogical. Below I describe how I revised my paper, keeping in mind the notes and critique.

Addressing first, I changed my thesis to keep in mind my analysis within the paper and focus more on literary elements rather than a sociological view. This is found on the first page and starts off with “This paper aims to analyze” and ends at the point “will never achieve.” I choose to focus more closely on specific quotes from the text with motifs of birds, the color blue, and themes such as beauty, war, and community or lack thereof. The argument I sought to display was a culmination of Pecola’s self views and practices to the ideas, burdens, and values taught to her by her parents. I choose to focus on her conflicts with white beauty standards, family dynamics, and issues with comparison.

As for the specific quotes I had previously analyzed, I choose to take out all sections regarding Claudia, Pecola, and Fredia’s interactions with Maureen as well as the Babydoll. I found it did not add to my paper and could not find a way to offer differing analysis. I did think to include the tip about “The Enemy” being a war reference, but did not want to use something that had been given as a hint. Instead of using that hint, I was able to find war-like references in the second quote used for Pecola (page 4) and Pauline’s quote about respectability (page 6). I did my best to change all of the noted spelling and grammar errors as well as correct citations both within the works cited page and with quotes themselves.

As for the in text citations themselves, I made sure to include both the page and book in reference specifically. I did have some difficulty as to how and from where I should cite things like the Morning glory flower since there weren't many articles in the story that talked about the culture or folklore about the flower. Additionally, while it might have been a bit silly I made sure to include the citation for the Alice and Jerry name analysis.

I decided to switch around the format of the paper a bit to have a better flow. Since I took out the previously mentioned sections, I do feel it does have a nice sequence of: introduction, Dick and Jane readers analysis, analysis from outside sources on Dick and Jane readers, connection to Pecola, Pecola’s demise, Colly analysis, Pauline analysis, and conclusion.

From these revisions, I felt I really learned a lot about habits I have taken on in my time here at Lafayette. As someone who is minoring in anthropology/sociology, that view point and paper style is really hard to kick as it has really impacted me both personally and academically. Within the paper itself, I tried to rework it to better fit the literary analysis angle by going back to the bread and butter of basic quote analysis, something I think I lost the hand of since I haven't taken

an English class since my junior fall semester. One of my favorite quotes that I analyzed was on page 3 with the “blue eyes” monologue!

Best,
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