MORRISON THEME OF BLACK LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

For Morrison, "all good art has been political" and the black artist has a responsibility to the black community. She aims at capturing "the something that defines what makes a book 'black.' And that has nothing to do with whether the people in the books are black or not." She thinks that one characteristic of black writers is "a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends." Her novels "bear witness" to the experience of the black community and blacks in that community. Her work "suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why, what was legal in the community as opposed to what was legal outside it."

Morrison wants her prose to recreate black speech, "to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power". Morrison deliberately strives for this effect, which she calls "aural literature. She uses magic, folktales, and the supernatural in her novels because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people. According to Morrison, another characteristic of black writing is a distinctive irony.

KEY WORDS: Afro-Americans, Ancestors, Alienated, Profound
Sense of Loss.

Morrison feels deeply the losses which Afro-Americans experienced in their migration from the rural South to the urban North from 1930 to 1950. They lost their sense of community, their connection to their past, and their culture. The oral tradition of storytelling and folktales was no longer a source of strength. Another source of strength, their music, which healed them, was taken over by the white community; consequently, it no longer belongs to them exclusively.

Roots, Community, and Identity

To have roots is to have a shared history. The individual who does not belong to a community is generally lost. The individual who leaves and has internalized the village or community is much more likely to survive. Also, a whole community—everyone—is needed to raise a child; one parent or two parents are inadequate to the task. The lack of roots and the disconnection from the community and the past cause individuals to become alienated; often her characters struggle unsuccessfully to identify, let alone fulfill an essential self.

Ancestors

Ancestors are necessary: they provide cultural information, they are a connection with the past, they protect, and they educate. The ancestor is "an abiding, interested, benevolent, guiding presence that is yours and is concerned about you, not quite like saints but having the same sort of access, none of which is new information." The ancestors may be parents, grandparents, teachers, or elders in the community. In *The Bluest Eye*, M'Dear is the ancestor figure. Morrison believes that the presence of the ancestor is one of the characteristics of black writing.

Extreme Situations

Morrison places her characters in extreme situations; she forces them to the edge of endurance and then pushes them beyond what we think human beings can bear. These conditions reveal their basic nature. We see that even good people act in remarkable and in terrible ways. Also, this "push toward the abyss" reveals what is heroic. That's the way I know why such people survive, who went under, who didn't, what the civilization was, because quiet as it's kept much of our business, our existence here, has been grotesque. It really has. The fact that we are a stable people making an enormous contribution in whatever way to the society is remarkable because all you have to do is scratch the surface, I don't mean us as individuals but as a race, and there is something quite astonishing there and that's what peaks my curiosity. I do not write books about everyday people. They really are extraordinary whether it's wicked, or stupid or wonderful or what have you.

Freedom and "Bad" Men

To be free, the individual must take risks. Morrison sees men ordinarily regarded as "bad," men who leave their families and refuse responsibilities, as free men. (She is using bad to mean both bad and good.) These men, who have "a nice wildness" and who are fearless and "comfortable with that fearlessness," are misunderstood and therefore condemned. Morrison admires them as adventurers who refuse to be controlled and who are willing to take risks. Because they own themselves, they are able to choose their own way to live their lives.
She explains:

They felt that they had been dealt a bad hand, and they just made up other rules. They couldn't win with the house deck and that was part of their daring... whereas other Black people--they were horrified by all that "bad" behavior. That's all a part of the range of what goes on among us, you know.

Their behavior points out a valuable principle to the non-outlaw blacks. Blacks have been cut off from their own natures and needs by conforming to the rules of white society. The outlaw serves as a partial solution to the problem of being out of touch with the essential self.

Until blacks understand in our own terms what our rites of passage are, what we need in order to nourish ourselves, what happens when we don't get that nourishment, then what looks like erratic behavior but isn't will frighten and confuse us. Life becomes comprehensible when we know what rules we are playing by.

She knows that, in our society, these outlaws have unfortunate and even disastrous effects on others and often end up unemployed or in prison. Nevertheless, in her world view, "evil is as useful as good" and "sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good."

Responsibility

Morrison is not advocating irresponsibility and destructive or chaotic behavior, however. She believes in the necessity of being responsible for one's choices: "freedom is choosing your responsibility. It's not having no responsibilities; it's choosing the ones you want." Jan Furman comments, "She respects the freedom even as she embraces the responsibility." Unfortunately, in our society, "many women have been given responsibilities they don't want" and which they could not refuse. Consequently, they are not free.

Good and Evil

Morrison shows understanding of and, often, compassion, for characters who commit horrific deeds, like incest-rape or infanticide. This trait springs in large part from her attitude toward good and evil, which she distinguishes from the conventional or Western view of good and evil. She describes a distinctive view which, she claims, blacks have historically held toward good and evil:

It was interesting that black people at one time seemed not to respond to evil in the ways other people did, but that they thought evil had a natural place in the universe; they did not wish to eradicate it. They just wished to protect themselves from it, maybe even to manipulate it, but they never wanted to kill it. They thought evil was just another aspect of life... It's because they're not terrified by evil, by difference. Evil is not an alien force; it's just a different force.

She shifts the boundaries between what we ordinarily regard as good and what as evil, so that judgments become difficult. This reflects the complexity of making moral judgments in life. Her villains are not all evil, nor are her good people saints.
Loss of Innocence

Innocence has to be lost in order for the individual to grow. Harold Bloom suggests that “the fall from innocence becomes a necessary gesture of freedom and a profound act of self-awareness.” Claudia, a narrator in *The Bluest Eye*, loses her innocence as she watches Pecola's destruction.

Events in The Bluest Eye

The events in *The Bluest Eye* are not presented chronologically; instead, they are linked by the voices and memories of two narrators. In the sections labeled with the name of a season, Claudia MacTeer's retrospective narration as an adult contains her childhood memories about what happened to Pecola. The other narrator, the omniscient narrator, then braids her stories into Claudia's season sections, introducing influential characters and events that shape Pecola's life.

Claudia MacTeer is now a grown woman, telling us about certain events that happened during the fall of 1941. She was only a child then, but she remembers that no marigolds bloomed that fall, and she and her friends thought it was probably because their friend and playmate, Pecola, was having her father's baby. She tells us that Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove, is now dead, the baby is dead, and the innocence of the young girls also died that fall.

We then segue into a lengthy flashback, to Autumn 1940, a year before the fall when no marigolds bloomed. Claudia and her older sister, Frieda, have just started school. That autumn, the MacTeers accept Mr. Henry as a roomer because his rent money will help pay bills. The family soon has another roomer — Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl whom county officials place in the MacTeer home after Pecola's father burns the family house down.

Pecola and the MacTeer girls share childhood adventures, and what Claudia remembers in particular is the startling onset of Pecola's puberty when the eleven-year-old girl unexpectedly has her first menstrual period.

The second narrator offers us her memories about Pecola's family. She describes the house where the Breedloves lived (before Cholly burned it down), and she points out the antagonistic relationship between Pecola's parents. We see Pecola and her brother, Sammy, bracing themselves for the ordeal of listening to their mother quarreling violently with their drunken father, Cholly, as he tries to sleep off the effects of the previous night's whiskey.

Against a backdrop of grinding poverty, with her parents locked in an ugly cycle of hostility and violence, Pecola seeks hope in her prayers for beauty, which she feels will lead to her being loved. Each night Pecola fervently prays for blue eyes, sky-blue eyes, thinking that if she looked different — pretty — perhaps everything would be better. Maybe everything would be beautiful.

Claudia's narrative returns with Winter. She remembers the arrival of Maureen Peal, a new girl in school, whom Claudia calls "the disrupter." Despite Maureen's protruding dog-tooth and the fact that she was born with an extra finger on each hand (removed at birth), Maureen seems to embody everything perfect; she has long, beautiful hair, light skin, green eyes, and bright, clean, pretty clothes. She is enchanting and popular with both the black and white children.
Pecola is not popular. On the playground, Frieda rescues her from a vicious group of boys who are harassing her. Maureen moves quickly and stands beside Pecola, and the boys leave. Maureen then links arms with Pecola and buys her some ice cream. The world seems wonderful until Maureen begins to talk about Pecola's father's nakedness. Claudia and Frieda quarrel with her, and during the squabble, Claudia swings at Maureen but hits Pecola instead. Maureen runs across the street and screams back at the three girls, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly . . . " Deeply hurt, Pecola curls her shoulders forward in misery.

The omniscient narrator now describes Geraldine, her son Junior, and her much-loved blue-eyed black cat. Neglected by his aloof and status-conscious mother, Junior wickedly lures an unsuspecting Pecola into his house under the pretense of showing her some kittens. Once inside, Junior hurls his mother's big black cat in her face. Scratched and terrified, Pecola moves toward the door, but Junior blocks her way. She is momentarily distracted by the black cat rubbing against her. The blue eyes in the cat's black face mesmerize her.

Junior grabs the cat and begins swinging it in circles. Trying to save the cat, Pecola grabs Junior, who falls and releases the cat, letting it fly full force against the window. Geraldine suddenly arrives home, and Junior immediately blames the cat's death on Pecola.

Claudia's narrative now resumes with Spring, and she tells us about painful whippings and about her father beating Mr. Henry for touching Frieda's tiny breasts. The sisters go to visit Pecola, who now lives in a drab downstairs apartment; the top floor is home to three prostitutes — Marie ("Miss Maginot Line"), China, and Poland.

The omniscient narrator then tells us about Pauline Breedlove's early life, her marriage to Cholly, the births of Pecola and Sammy, and her job as a servant for a well-to-do white family.

Pauline's story is followed by a recounting of Cholly's traumatic childhood and adolescence. Abandoned by his mother and father, Cholly is raised by a beloved great aunt, Jimmy, who dies when Cholly is a teenager. During Cholly's first sexual experience, he and the girl, Darlene, are discovered by two white men, who mock and humiliate them. Afterward, the pain of humiliation, coupled with the fear that Darlene might be pregnant, prompt Cholly to leave town and head toward Macon, where he hopes to locate his father, Samson Fuller. He finds a belligerent wreck of a man who wants nothing to do with his son. Cholly eventually shakes off the crushing encounter. One day while he is in Kentucky, he meets Pauline Williams, marries her, and fathers two children, Sammy and Pecola.

Years later, on a Saturday afternoon in spring, Cholly staggers home. In a drunken, confused state of love and lust, he rapes eleven-year-old Pecola and leaves her dazed and motionless on the kitchen floor.

The omniscient narrator continues, introducing the character of Elihue Micah Whitcomb, a self-proclaimed psychic and faith healer known as Soaphead Church. He is visited by what he calls a pitifully unattractive black girl of about twelve or so, with a protruding pot belly, who asks him for blue eyes. He tricks her into poisoning a sickly old dog, proclaiming the dog's sudden death as a sign from God that her wish will be granted.

Claudia's narrative returns with Summer, and she tells us that she and Frieda learned from gossip that Pecola was pregnant by her father. She remembers the mix of emotions she felt for Pecola — shame, embarrassment, and finally sorrow.
Alone and pregnant, Pecola talks to her only companion — a hallucination. She can no longer go to school, so she wraps herself in a cloak of madness that comforts her into believing that everyone is jealous of her miraculous, new blue eyes.

In this final section, Claudia says that she remembers seeing Pecola after the baby was born prematurely and died. Pecola's brother, Sammy, left town, and Cholly died in a workhouse. Pauline is still doing housework for white folks, and she and Pecola live in a little brown house on the edge of town.

An Overview of The Bluest Eye

Morrison's story about a young black girl's growing self-hatred begins with an excerpt from a typical first-grade primer from years ago. The tone is set immediately: "Good" means being a member of a happy, well-to-do white family, a standard that is continually juxtaposed against "bad," which means being black, flawed, and strapped for money. If one is to believe the first-grade primer, everyone is happy, well-to-do, good-looking, and white. One would never know that black people existed in this country. Against this laughing, playing, happy white background, Morrison juxtaposes the novel's black characters, and she shows how all of them have been affected in some way by the white media — its movies, its books, its myths, and its advertising. For the most part, the blacks in this novel have blindly accepted white domination and have therefore given expensive white dolls to their black daughters at Christmas. Mr. Henry believes that he is being complimentary when he calls Frieda and Claudia "Greta Garbo" and "Ginger Rogers." The schoolchildren — the black schoolboys, in particular — are mesmerized by the white-ish Maureen Peal, and Maureen herself enjoys telling about the black girl who dared to request a Hedy Lamarr hairstyle.

The Bluest Eye is a harsh warning about the old consciousness of black folks' attempts to emulate the slave master. Pecola's request is not for more money or a better house or even for more sensible parents; her request is for blue eyes — something that, even if she had been able to acquire them, would not have abated the harshness of her abject reality.

Pecola's story is very much her own, unique and dead-end, but it is still relevant to centuries of cultural mutilation of black people in America. Morrison does not have to retell the story of three hundred years of black dominance by white culture for us to be aware of the history of American blacks, who have been victims in this tragedy.

The self-hatred that is at the core of Pecola's character affects, in one degree or another, all of the other characters in the novel. As noted earlier, a three-hundred-year-old history of people brought to the United States during the period of slavery has led to a psychological oppression that fosters a love of everything connected with the slave masters while promoting a revulsion toward everything connected with themselves. All cultures teach their own standards of beauty and desirability through billboards, movies, books, dolls, and other products. The white standard of beauty is pervasive throughout this novel — because there is no black standard of beauty.

Standing midway between the white and black worlds is the exotic Maureen Peal, whose braids are described as "two lynch ropes." Morrison's chilling description of Maureen's hair is intentional, for she is referring to the young black men who look in awe at the white-ish Maureen. These young men, she is saying, are symbolic of all of the black men who have allowed themselves to be mesmerized by Anglo standards of beauty. As a result, they turn on their own — just as the boys turn on Pecola. Her blackness forces the boys to face their own blackness, and thus they make Pecola the scapegoat for their own ignorance, for their own self-hatred, and for their own
feelings of hopelessness. Pecola becomes the dumping ground for the black community's fears and feelings of unworthiness.

From the day she is born, Pecola is told that she is ugly. Pecola's mother, Pauline, is more concerned with the appearance of her new baby than she is with its health. Pecola learns from her mother that she is ugly, and she thereby learns to hate herself; because of her blackness, she is continually bombarded by rejection and humiliation from others around her who value "appearance."

Unfortunately, Pecola does not have the sophistication to realize that she is not the only little black girl who doesn't have the admired, valued Anglo features — neither do most of the blacks who torment her. Pecola knows only that she wants to be prized and loved, and she believes that if she could look white, she would be loved. However, she becomes the scapegoat for all of the other black characters, for, in varying degrees, they too suffer from the insanity that manifests itself in Pecola's madness.

If Morrison seems to focus on female self-hatred in Pecola, it is clear that feelings of self-hatred are not limited to black girls alone. Boys receive just as much negative feedback from the white community, but they are far more likely to direct their emotions and retaliation outward, inflicting pain on others before the pain turns inward and destroys them. Cholly and Junior are prime examples.

After the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison explained that she was trying to show the nature and relationship between parental love and violence. One of the novel's themes is that parents, black parents in this case, do violence to their children every day — if only by forcing them to judge themselves by white standards. The topic of child abuse, once a socially unmentionable subject, remained unaddressed far too long even though everyone knew about it. Mr. Henry's touching Frieda's breasts is a subtle preparation, or foreshadowing, of Cholly Breedlove's rape of Pecola. When Cholly rapes Pecola, it is a physical manifestation of the social, psychological, and personal violence that has raped Cholly for years. His name is "Breedlove," but he is incapable of loving; he is only able to perform the act of breeding. Because he has been so depreciated by white society, he is reduced to breeding with his own daughter, a union so debased that it produces a stillborn child, one who cannot survive for even an hour in this world where self-hatred breeds still more self-hatred.

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