


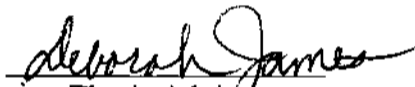
Intentionality: Toni Morrison and *The Bluest Eye*

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In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book - leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity—Toni Morrison 1998.

Toni Morrison has been awarded numerous prestigious literary awards for her nine novels during her forty year career including the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Beloved* in 1988, and in 1993, she became the first African American woman awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Morrison is more than a prolific author; she is a literary critic and professor of Literature and Composition. Although many literary critics find the discussion of authorial intent a highly debatable topic, it becomes impossible to ignore Morrison's unyielding literary agenda. She is very vocal about how she wants her work to be interpreted and the messages she wishes to convey to her audience, and she uses her status as both a respected author and literary theorist to reinforce her intentions. Through her works, both fiction and non-fiction, Morrison seeks to deconstruct African American society, and in turn, American society as a whole, using her often disturbing narrations that function as mirrors reflecting the injustices of the real world. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is crafted in a way that draws the audience into the story and makes them a part of the community that surrounds the two central characters, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer. By inviting the audience into the story, Morrison intends to provoke self-interrogation and ultimately, change in the real world. Morrison accomplishes this by evoking traditional elements of African American folklore, the "call and response" style of Black preaching, and inclusive language.

The construction of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* can be traced to Black folk sermons. Black folk sermons were more than a feature of religious ceremonies. During these sermons the congregation united on many levels, social and religious, by including discussions on community events and concerns as well as spiritual matters. The members of the congregation worked to help those in the community who were in need. During the Civil Rights Movement, ministers, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., rallied their congregations to speak out against inequality. Critic Gary Layne Hatch comments on how Black folk sermons use traditional elements of logic in their construction:

These sermons contain appeals to reason, but these appeals are not presented explicitly as a thesis with support or as claims backed by reasons and evidence... The appeals to reason in Black folk sermons are embedded in the narratives, examples, comparisons, and biblical references... These narratives establish a series of relationships that appeal to the intellect and imagination as well as the emotions. These relationships constitute a type of 'poetic' logic in which reasoning is neither inductive nor deductive, but rather analogical, proceeding from one particular instance to another particular instance of the same relationship (228).

The Bluest Eye follows the construction of a Black folk sermon as described by Hatch. Morrison presents her narrative as a comparison between the MacTeer family and the Breedlove family, in particular, the way in which the community's interactions between these two families affects the lives of their young daughters, Pecola Breedlove and Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. Morrison shows how the community's treatment of these girls is based on their parents' station in the social hierarchy of the community. The more respected and accepted the parents are, the more advantages and support the girls receive from their neighbors.

Morrison acknowledges her connection to Black folk sermons during an interview. She comments that one of the major characteristics of “Black art that she tries to incorporate into her works” is:

The ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those aspects so that the stories can be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well. It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon... to stand up and to weep... to change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered... Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance... to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book— is what’s important (Harris 1).

This relationship between the author and the audience is the foundation for Morrison’s literary agenda. Morrison functions as the minister evoking the “call and response” style of Black sermons. Critic Michael Foster explains “call-and-response” as according to Geneva Smitherman’s *Talking and Testifying: The Language of Black America*. Foster reports, “Smitherman defines call-and-response as ‘spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interactions between the speaker and listener in which all of the statements (calls) are punctuated by expressions (responses) from the listener (1). Morrison wants her audience to act as “witnesses” to the statements she presents in the text. After having the audience affirm that Pecola’s story is a tragedy, she then asks the audience to re-evaluate who is the cause of her destruction. It is in this time of contemplation that the audience recognizes their role in Pecola’s story.

Moving from orally transmitted tales and sermons to written forms structurally changes the way an author presents the material. Some critics argue that the written forms have lost some of the authentic characteristics of Black communication. However, critic Trudier Harris feels Morrison creates texts that have “gone beyond the mere grafting of traditional items into her fiction;” she has navigated a complex relationship between “form and structure” and creates texts that use and expand on the themes of traditional African American folklore without losing authenticity (7). Claudia MacTeer, the first person narrator of *The Bluest Eye*, functions as the “active tradition bearer” whose storytelling has the power to shape the consciousness of the community (15). Morrison uses Claudia in two narrative forms: the adult version who begins and ends the novel and provides omniscient insight during the plot, and the young girl version who participates in the plot. Having young Claudia as a participant in the story, the audience understands her connection to the plot. She relays the story as she saw it, and this gives her credibility as a narrator. Claudia presents the heartbreaking story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old African American girl growing up in Ohio during the 1940’s. Pecola internalizes the judgment that her ethnic features are ugly because she accepts the white standards of beauty: blue eyes, pale skin, and “Shirley Temple,” as the pinnacles of perfection. Pecola is systematically abused and oppressed by her family, community, and society’s white standards of beauty, culminating in her descent into madness after her father rapes and impregnates her.

Harris affirms that *The Bluest Eye* is a “narrative in the best tradition of an African American interactive, communal event” (15). The audience is told in the very beginning that Pecola’s story is a tragedy ending in her rape and the premature birth and death of her father’s child. Instead of trying to explain why the events of the plot unfolded the way they do, Morrison wants the audience to understand how the events came to be. Claudia states at the beginning of

the novel, “There is really nothing more to say-except why. But since the why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in the how” (*The Bluest Eye* 6). In order to explain “the how” Morrison provides back-stories for many of the principal characters including Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, Pecola’s parents. Through stories of their past, the audience gains understanding of the development of their identities, and these stories excite sympathy within the audience for characters that would otherwise be despised. Pauline and Cholly are victims of racism at the hands of white society and shunned by members of the African American community. Morrison, however, never excuses the horrible behavior of Pecola’s perpetrators, but influences the audience to consider the community’s responsibility and role in the outcome. It is through careful craftsmanship that Morrison is able to pull the audience into the story, therefore making them members of the community as well.

In order to facilitate the inclusion of the audience into the community of the novel, Morrison presents Pecola’s plight as well as the reactions and involvement of the African American community in her story. The plot of the novel is exposed in fragments, leaving the audience to reassemble the pieces as the story unfolds. The plot centers on the lives of the Breedlove family, Cholly, Pauline, Sammy, and Pecola, who live in an African American community in Ohio during 1941. They are outcasts of society, living on the edge of destitution. Pecola and her older brother Sammy are placed in foster care after Cholly beats Pauline and tries to burn down their home. The community’s values center on having a place to stay; the basic need of shelter for survival dominates many of their choices in life. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison writes, “Knowing that there was such a thing as outdoors bred in us a hunger for property, for ownership. The firm possession of a yard, a porch, a grape arbor. Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests (18). Claudia explains the fear of being “outdoors”

as something that was more than losing a home, but having nowhere to go and no one to turn to, being as permanent as “death” (17-18). Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia’s mother and well respected lady of the community, explained, “Cholly Breedlove... having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was indeed an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger” (18). The audience recognizes the change in diction used by Mrs. MacTeer during this statement as an incursion by the narrator, the adult Claudia, explaining her understanding of what Mrs. MacTeer had meant. Morrison provides the audience with many incursions during the novel, allowing the audience to see beyond the physical actions and spoken dialogue of a character to the internal reasoning and motivation of the character.

Once in foster care, Pecola receives her first taste of a real home. Mrs. MacTeer shows Pecola kindness by allowing her to stay in their home. While staying in the MacTeer home, Pecola undergoes two life changing events: menstruating for the first time and realizing that those who have blue eyes seem to have everyone love them. But once Pecola is returned to Cholly, Mrs. MacTeer and the other women of the community withdraw the concern they show toward the girl. It is as if Pecola is no longer their problem. They rationalized that they had *done* something to help her, not realizing it was too little, too late. Even after the rape, the community does nothing for Pecola. It was as if they pushed her and the horrible crime as far away from themselves as possible. Claudia confirms, “They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened for the one who would say, ‘Poor little girl’ or ‘Poor baby,’ but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been” (190). How could a community not help this child? What is Morrison saying about this community for allowing Pecola’s perpetrators to go without punishment? Do they rationalize that Pecola, being a part of Cholly, wasn’t worth saving, nothing more than an animal? According to

the women: “she carry some of the blame” because she must have done something to provoke or partake in the act that ended in her pregnancy (189). One could argue that the women’s response is common to the prevailing views about rape in the 1940’s, however Morrison provides evidence in a molestation scene involving Frieda that shows their reaction is based more on how they see Pecola and her family than on a common prevailing view. Morrison is clearly making a statement about the community’s flaws to the audience and the audience agrees, “witnesses,” that community could have intervened in Pecola’s life. The community failed Pecola, a truly innocent child, many times and then blamed her for being raped by her own father. According to Morrison, the community is broken because they allowed this to happen to one of their own.

In order to show the impact a community has on the life of an accepted member, Morrison included a scene of child molestation with Frieda, Claudia’s sister, and Mr. Henry, a boarder in the MacTeer home. Henry touches Frieda’s breasts and she rushed to find her parents to tell them what had occurred. Frieda knew her parents would help her; she never contemplated that they would be angry with her or blame her. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer immediately take action to find Mr. Henry with the help of their neighbors. The whole community rallied behind Frieda to show their solidarity against an evil that threatened their young. But how does this even come close to the horror that befell Pecola? They never questioned Frieda’s role in the situation because her parents are members of their group. The MacTeers are accepted and the Breedloves are ostracized. This scene is meant to outrage the audience, not because the neighborhood helps Frieda, but because they could have helped Pecola fight her molester too. Morrison shows that the community has strength but chooses to wield its power based on classist rationales. The Breedloves are of a lower class than the MacTeers. The neighborhood sees the MacTeers as having more worth than the Breedloves.

During the course of this non-linear novel, the audience recognizes the extent of the Breedloves' ostracism. As Mrs. MacTeer commented, Cholly allowing his family to be "outdoors" made him of the lowest possible class. To show the vast difference between Cholly and an accepted man of society, Morrison uses Mr. MacTeer's role of keeping his family warm throughout winter verses Cholly who lets his family freeze. Claudia says, "My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there... Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills. A Vulcan guarding the flames...he will not unrazor his lips until spring (61). Mr. MacTeer is presented as a protector throughout the novel. He attacks Mr. Henry when he found out Frieda had been his treated; he does not allow this child to be harmed by the outside and the people in it. Morrison does not give very much information about Mr. MacTeer, but what she does provide shows him as a hardworking, loving parent. Winter is very different for the Breedlove home. Cholly drinks himself into a stupor and ignores the needs of his family. Pauline and the children are forced to carry in the coal and tend the fire while Cholly sleeps. Pauline, in anger, yells at Cholly, "It's as cold as a witch's tit in this house. Your whiskey ass wouldn't feel hellfire, but I'm cold. I got to do a lot of things, but I ain't got to freeze (40). Instead of protecting his daughter from evil men, he rapes her. The good father, Mr. MacTeer, is recognized by his community as a respectable man. Cholly, being a bad father, is acknowledged as a "ratty nigger" (18).

A similar comparison is made between how Mrs. MacTeer cares for her sick child and how Pauline ignores the pain of her child. Mrs. MacTeer fights away Claudia's fever as if it were an intruder seeking to harm her child. Sickness, according to Claudia, is a stumbling block hindering the necessary actions of daily life; "How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick" (10). Mrs. MacTeer curses the sickness for threatening her

home and the life everyone struggles to maintain. On the other hand, Morrison provides two powerful instances of neglect involving Pauline's treatment of Pecola. The first occurs Pecola visited Pauline at her employer's home and knocked over a hot pie, burning her legs in the process. Pauline scolded Pecola for not only ruining the pie but also for upsetting the white child in her care. "Polly," a nickname given by her employers, lavished loving attention on the upset white child (109). The second instance is when she finds Pecola raped on their kitchen floor. Pauline covers not only her child's nakedness with a blanket, but also the crime itself. After Pecola's mind shatters, she develops an imaginary friend with whom she has conversations. Pecola's dialog with this "friend" explains that she told Pauline what had happened to her. "She didn't even believe me when I told her. *So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time? She wouldn't have believed me then either*" (200). The audience realizes that Pecola was not just raped once, but that it happened twice. Pecola told her mother about the rape, but Pauline didn't believe her. Pauline allowed the abuse to continue because she did not possess the ability to break away from her husband. She had no one to turn to and nowhere to go.

Even though Morrison provides the audience with drastic contrasts in how her characters approach their children, she never places the totality of blame on Cholly and Pauline's shoulders for harming and neglecting their daughter. Through Cholly and Pauline's back stories, the audience recognizes the extent of mental and physical harm inflicted on these two characters. Morrison shows how society created monsters out of Cholly and Pauline. How Morrison is able to gain sympathy for Cholly is amazing. Cholly Breedlove is a despicable character. He is an abuser and a drunk. His children live in constant fear of his wrath. The only time he ever attempts to show Pecola "tenderness" he violates her innocence. In his twisted sense of logic he shows her the only loving attention she had ever received. He touched her when no one else

does. He takes pleasure in a body everyone else calls ugly. He looks at her when everyone else looks away (191-192). Why should anyone feel anything but hatred for this character? He destroys everyone and everything in his life, but he wasn't always a bad man; he also once was an innocent child.

By including the story of his youth, Morrison sheds light on the events that led to Cholly becoming a monster. Cholly was abandoned by his mother on a junk pile when he was first born. His elderly Aunt Jimmy saves him and raises him the best she can. He was still a young boy when she died and after her funeral he has his first sexual experience. He was nervous and scared but was enjoying the new exploration into adulthood. This however became a life-altering incident for another reason. A group of white men saw him with the girl and jeered. He tried to cover himself but they shouted, "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good... Come on, coon. Faster. You ain't doing nothing for her" (148). The more they embarrassed him, the more he grew to hate the girl underneath him. He couldn't be angry with the white men; they held all the power in this situation. Cholly was regarded as less than a man, an object of pure entertainment, for these white men. His helplessness and fear of retribution made him look for something to take his anger out on. So he grew angry with the only one more helpless than himself, the girl. The audience recognizes his embarrassment and feels sorry for him. He was just a young boy being ridiculed by a group of grown men for no other reason than their own sick enjoyment.

In addition, Cholly never knew what a man should be. His own father, Samson Fuller, never raised him or even knew he existed until Cholly sought him out. After the incident with the girl, Cholly ran away to find his father. Once his aunt died he no longer had a family to depend on. This realization both freed him and made him vulnerable to the outside world. He

wanted to find Samson to have a sense of belonging; someone he could depend on. However finding his father only further traumatized him. Samson was belligerent and uninterested. Cholly was so upset by the realization that Samson would never care for or be a father to him, he defecates on himself. He hid under a pier fearing his father would laugh at him if he saw the mess he had made in his pants. "He remained knotted there in fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight, only darkness and heat and the press of his knuckles on his eyelids" (157). Cholly was never the same after that. He was broken in a way no one could fix. All of this happens to him when he was just a couple of years older than Pecola. He was still a child and no one came to help him; if they had, Pecola's story might have been very different. The audience begins to understand that the events leading to Pecola's rape started many years before she was born. By showing Cholly as a traumatized child, Morrison elicits sympathy for him.

Another character Morrison depicts in a sympathetic light is Pauline, Pecola's mother. Pauline Breedlove is a self-proclaimed martyr. She chooses to live in torment in the hope that Christ would judge her worthy for her struggle, and Cholly unworthy for his evil. She finds intimacy with her husband by starting fights; she needs them as much as she needs air. Her children are nothing but reminders of her ugliness. They call her "Mrs. Breedlove" not mother, or momma; this shows the detachment Pauline has from her children. She shows no intimate relationship with her children. Pauline grew up in a large family of twelve children on a farm in the middle of nowhere in Alabama. She stepped on a nail as a toddler; it caused her foot to be disabled. This disability was the only thing that kept Pauline from being completely invisible to her parents. She dreamed of the day a handsome stranger would sweep her off her feet and take her away from her life in the country. Cholly was everything she had always wanted; he showed

her the attention she had always craved. They were happy and in love. It wasn't until they moved to the city that their happy marriage started to crumble. Cholly paid less attention to her and more attention to alcohol. The city women looked at Pauline as just a simple country girl. She had no friends even though she tried to fit in by dressing like them and wearing make-up.

So Pauline made up a fantasy life based on the movies she spent her days in. She judged her own beauty based on the standards of the movie stars. She explains:

I'member one time I went to see Clarke Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers in a magazine...I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could have cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don't believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that (123).

The African American community embraced the ideal white standards of beauty: light skin, straight hair, and blue eyes. Pauline could never meet these standards so she believed she was ugly, and in turn, her children being a part of her, were also ugly. She created a fantasy home for herself as the maid for a white family. She gave their children all the love she believed her children were unworthy of. It is easy to hate Pauline for not stopping the abuse and for not loving her children the way a mother should, but she was a broken person. Her life was hard and she coped the only way she could. She cut off her emotions in the same way Pecola does. Pauline displays trademarks of what society now calls "battered women syndrome:" she fights back but doesn't leave. Her self-esteem is extremely low. She doesn't believe she is worthy of pleasures in life. She never received affection and attention from her own parents, all her

brothers and sisters were given nicknames, but she wasn't. They withheld this gift from her, and she saw that as a lack of love. Therefore, she doesn't know how to provide her children with that love. If she had had girlfriends in the community, maybe she would have had the support she needed to fight her way out of her horrible marriage. Instead, the women gossip about her and exclude her from their lives. They treat her as a lower class person, just some simple country girl, never as their equal.

Once Morrison provokes sympathy in the audience for Cholly and Pauline, she is able to deliver her logical argument, her sermon. Morrison evokes the rational thinking of the audience as well as their emotions to get them involved in the story. She asks them to witness to the facts: (a) Cholly and Pauline were once innocent children in need of help because of abuse, neglect, and racism, (b) they did not have role models for being loving, protective, parents, (c) they had no one in the community to turn to for help and support, (d) therefore, Pecola, being Cholly and Pauline's child, was an outcast from the community, (e) what happened to Pecola was a horrible crime that could have been prevented, and (f) the community failed Pecola. After delivering this logical assessment of the plot, Morrison forces the audience to evaluate *who* constitutes the community. Is it just the immediate neighborhood of Lorain, Ohio? The African American community? The society as a whole? Does the community include members of the real world? It is through the narration of Claudia, that Morrison invites the audience to become part of the story. The audience feels as if Claudia is speaking directly to them through the use of plural pronouns "we," "us," and "our." In the final pages of the novel Claudia states "We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. And fantasy it was, for we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved" (205-206). The "we"

Claudia is speaking of is “all of us—all who knew her” that includes the reading audience who has come to know Pecola through the novel (205).

Morrison forces the audience to investigate their own lives by presenting this story as both a statement of reality and as a call to action using the traditional style of black folk sermons. Through the narrative, Morrison presents the negative example of the Breedlove family and shows through the contrast to the MacTeer family that if the community rallies together to help them neighbors in need, they can make a real difference in society. Little girls like Pecola live in our communities. Morrison is asking the questions: Will you stand aside, perpetuate false standards of beauty, and allow this systematic racism to destroy the lives of families in our community, or will you be proactive in helping create a solution? Do you watch young girls suffer at the hands of their parents or do you become involved in the family’s life? Morrison comments in an Afterward included in *The Bluest Eye* released in the 1994 Plum Edition:

I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse. One problem was centering: the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn’t work: many readers remain touched but not moved (Li 18).

Critic J. Brooks Bouson addresses the audience’s responses to the book from a psychological prospective. He writes: “Morrison, in her strategic public exposure of the incest secret, breaks the taboo on looking and thus risks shaming her readers, for just as those who are exposed feel shame, so observers of shaming scenes can feel shame” (27). Incest, by nature, is a family

secret, one that is hidden from the world by the perpetrators and the ones being perpetrated. Some readers feel shame because Morrison is exposing them, in graphic language, to the incest happening to Pecola. Bouson notes: "Shame, by its nature, is contagious. Moreover, just as shame has an intrinsic tendency to encourage hiding, so there is a tendency for the observer of another's shame to turn away from it" (27). This hiding, turning away from the shameful secret presented in *The Bluest Eye* is the response of some of Morrison's audience. However, others feel the impact of the story and use it as a way of creating change in the world.

Throughout the novel, Morrison elicits an unusual response from her audience with her characterization of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. These two characters are predators feeding on Pecola's life and innocence, yet, the audience feels sympathy for them. By showing the events that led to them becoming monsters, she causes the audience to recognize the community's role in their creation. Pecola could have been saved, or at the very least championed, by her society. They allowed Cholly to abuse her. They allowed Pauline to neglect her. Her name carried unwarranted shame because it was easier to blame her than to admit they let her down. Morrison never justifies Pecola's treatment; she uses her story as a warning for society. Society creates monsters and doesn't deal with the consequences of their actions. Claudia ends the book by saying, "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain kinds of seed it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live... We were wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late" (*The Bluest Eye* 206). The "soil" is the community and all the standards it has accepted as its own: white beauty ideals, possession of property, and class systems that determine a member's worth. The "flowers" are the people living within the community. Girls like Pecola are not nurtured, encouraged to flourish. They are not able to grow and thrive in the community because the

“soil” is toxic. Claudia and Frieda are given the tools necessary to thrive. They have a strong family and support from their neighbors; they fight to protect their status within the community. They find beauty within themselves. Morrison’s novels are multifaceted. Within her prose, she imbeds many levels of symbolic and thematic images for the audience to interpret.

Interpreting African American women writers presents literary theorists with complex questions as to how to analyze texts. Can the author’s race and gender be excluded from the discussion and analysis of the text? New Critical and Formalist theorists state that nothing but the text itself matters including the author’s biographical information. Other critics, such as Harold Bloom, exclude Morrison’s race and chose to focus on her connections to other American authors such as William Faulkner. Bloom writes that “her early phase has many of the canonical qualifications of the traditional Western literary kind that she fiercely rejects as being irrelevant to her” (1). Bloom has a foundation for his argument because Morrison’s academic career is rooted in Western literary tradition and because of the time period she attended university she was exposed to almost entirely white male authors. She graduated from Howard University in 1953 with B.A in English and continued her education at Cornell University where she received a M.A. in English in 1955. After receiving her degrees, Morrison taught English and Literature at Texas Southern University, Howard University, and Princeton (Samuels, Hudson-Weems 9-10).

Yet, the stance of the majority of the critical conversations of Morrison’s text propose that all texts are influenced by society and the author’s place within that society, therefore making the division between the author’s race and gender and the text impossible. Critic Houston A. Baker, Jr. explains in, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American*

Women's Writings, that African American women create their own system for understanding and analyzing texts based on their cultural experiences of “black womanhood” (9). Baker insists:

Afro-American women artists—as opposed to self-differentiated critics, anthropologists, art historians, musicologist, and so forth—have always been a source of wisdom and practical insight about their own works... Similarly, a present-day scholar of Toni Morrison's oeuvre has the author's own sophisticated critiques for guidance (10).

For Baker, the most important aspect of modern literary criticism is the emergence of prolific African American women as writers, scholars, and critics provides a perspective on the texts that cannot and should not be ignored by literary theorists.

Morrison speaks to the issue of race in literary criticism in her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*:

A criticism that needs to insist that literature is not only “universal” but also “race-free” risks lobotomizing that literature, and diminishes both the art and the artist. I am vulnerable to inference here that my inquiry has vested interests; that is because I am an African American and a writer I stand to benefit in ways not limited to intellectual fulfillment from this line of questioning. I will have to risk the accusation because the point is too important: for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive (12-13).

Morrison does not mean that themes within a novel cannot be “universal” but is remarking that race plays a major role in the construction of literary. In *The Bluest Eye*, for example, Morrison presents the universal theme of seeking something, in Pecola's case blue eyes, to better your

quality of life. However, Pecola's race plays a major factor in her quest. She cannot obtain her desire because she cannot change her eye color. Pecola's desire is really to change her race. She wants to be white in order to gain love and acceptance from society. Removing race from the reading of the text is essentially removing the catalyst of the plot.

Morrison illustrates the famous saying "it takes a village to raise a child" in *The Bluest Eye*. She shows the audience that surviving and living are not the same thing. Pecola was given the bare necessities of survival: food, clothing, and shelter. Claudia and Frieda were given these same necessities but also love and support. Being accepted by their community, gave them options in life never afforded to Pecola. The community rallied behind Claudia and Frieda, and these girls grew into women because of this support. Pecola, however, retreated into her fantasy world for comfort.

Through her literary career Morrison has become an icon, a representative of the African American literary community. Because Morrison is willing to provide her critics and reviewers interviews about her work, style, and intentions and comments on her own text through her criticisms, it becomes difficult to separate her critical career from her fiction writing career. Morrison writes both her criticism and her fiction with a designed purpose. Her purpose is to unite and empower both the African American community and the American community as a whole by provoking self-interrogation and understanding of communal responsibility. *The Bluest Eye* uses the logical argument and call-and-response style of Black folk sermons to draw the audience into the story. She wants the audience to interact with the text beyond the reading by internalizing the struggle of the characters and connecting the themes to their personal lives. Morrison never excuses the behavior of Cholly and Pauline, but asks the audience to consider

what could have happened if the community had embraced these broken people instead of treating them as disposable, as pieces of trash.

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