Realizations of Black Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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Tutkielmani käsittelee Toni Morrisonin esikoisromaania The Bluest Eye. Romaanin tarina vie lukijan 1940 –luvun Ohioon, missä 12-vuotias afrikkalaisamerikkalainen Pecola lyhistyy perheensä ja yhteiskunnan harjoittaman henkisen ja ruumiillisen väkivallan kohteena. Tavoitteeni on tutkia miten erinäiset romaanin aihealueellisesti poliittispainotteiset ja tyylilliset piirteet osoittavat romaanin olevan afrikkalaisamerikkalaista kulttuuria ja itsetuntoa vahvistavaa, *black aesthetic* -kirjallisuutta. Analyysin edetessä tulee ilmeiseksi, että Morrisonin tyyli ja sanoma tukevat tietoisesti toisiaan, muodostaen toisiaan tasapainottavan ja täydentävan, saumattoman kokonaisuuden.

Johdannossa hahmotan romaanin ilmestymisajan poliittista ilmapiiriä. 1960–1970 –lukujen afrikkalaisamerikkalaiset poliittiset suuntaukset vaikuttavat selkeästi Morrisonin kirjalliseen tuotantoon. Valotan *black power* ja afrikkalaisamerikkalainen feminismi -liikkeiden taustoja, sekä niistä vaikutteita saanutta *black aesthetic* –liikettä. Katsoin tärkeäksi sisallyttää tutkielmaan suhteellisen laajan ideologisen taustan selvityksen, koska sen ymmärtäminen edesauttaa analyyttisen kokonaiskuvan muodostusta.

Jatkan analyysiä keskittymällä ensin romaanissa ilmeneviin poliittisiin kysymyksiin. Pohdin, miten rasismi ja länsimaalainen maailmankuva rasittavat romaanin yhteisoä ja siinä vaikuttavia henkilöitä. Selvitän kaksoistietoisuuden (*double-consciousness)* ja länsimaisen kauneuskuvan sisäistämisen ongelmallisuutta afrikkalaisamerikkalaisessa todellisuudessa. Käsittelen myös romaanin feminismipainotteisia aiheita ja afrikkalaisamerikkalaisen yhteisön paineita omissa osioissaan.

Ideologisesta pohdinnasta siirryn tarkastelemaan Morrisonin tärkeimpiä tyylikeinoja. Romaanin afrikkalaisamerikkalaisen tarinaperinteen ja luonnonläheisyyden värittämä tyyli, sekä puhekielen sisällyttäminen tekstiin edesauttavat afrikkalaisamerikkalaisen identiteetin vahvistamista. Selvitän myös miten runollisen realismin (*poetic realism*) ja goottilaisten tyylikeinojen käyttö syventävät romaanin henkilöiden sisäisen maailman kuvaamista.

Tutkielman loppuosiossa pyrin tiivistamaan The Bluest Eye - romaanin pääsanoman ja teknisen rakenteen sellaiseen muotoon, etta ne vahvistavat kysymyksenasetteluni tuloksen.

Asiasanat: *black aesthetic/art, black* power, afrikkalaisamerikkalainen feminismi

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction **1**

2. Politics Leading to Black Arts, and Story of The Bluest Eye **5**

2.1. Black Power 6

2.2. Black Women's Liberation 7

2.3. Black Arts/Aesthetic 11

2.4. Background and Story of The Bluest Eye 14

3. Political Concerns **18**

3.1. Double-Consciousness 20

3.2. Beauty Presented Via Institutional Racism and Personal Prejudice 23

3.3. Colorism and Racial Self-hatred 29

3.4. Black Feminist Concerns 33

3.5. Failing Community 39

4. Stylistic and Structural Devices **44**

4.1. Black Storytelling Tradition 45

4.2. Black Dialect 50

4.3. Poetic Realism and Gothic Fable 54

4.4. Nature 59

5. Conclusion **63**

Works Cited **67**

1. Introduction

This thesis is a study of the political, stylistic and structural features of Toni Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye. The study illustrates the novel's qualities as black arts literature. I was inspired to study Morrison's first novel because it strikes as being simultaneously very political and artistic in its language. Black arts, or black aesthetic, calls for literary expression that has an African-American point of view. Black arts literature addresses the major concerns of the black political movements of the 1960's and beyond, and it is written in a style that is faithful to Black English and culturally specific story-telling traditions.[1] In The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable, Marc C. Conner criticizes the sometimes one-sided critique of Toni Morrison's works, stating that good criticism will "refuse distinction between aesthetic and instrumental functions of language".[2] I agree with Conner's sentiment, and claim to study The Bluest Eye from a multi-dimensional perspective, presenting both the ideological and the aesthetic realms of the novel.

Political concerns are very important to Morrison. The author readily admits having an ideological agenda in her work: "The work must be political. It must have that as its thrust… The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time".[3] The Bluest Eye was published in 1970, during an era active with black political movements. Morrison was influenced by the ideologies of the black power, black aesthetic and women's liberation movements. The Bluest Eye is rich with political influences, and the novel is also the most personal of Morrison's narratives. The central theme of the book

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[1] William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds., The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature (New York: Oxford UP, 1997) 74.
[2] Marc C. Conner, ed., "Introduction", The Aesthetic of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000) x.
[3] Denise Heinze, The Dilemma of Double-Consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993) 9.

evolves from a real incident the author experienced in elementary school. Her black classmate confessed to her that she wanted blue eyes. The incident left Morrison stunned and angry, her worldview changed. The words of her classmate never left her mind until she poured her frustration towards "racial self-loathing"[4] into her first novel.

All Morrison's texts illustrate subject matter similar to The Bluest Eye. Her novels discuss the experiences of the oppressed black minorities in isolated communities. The dominant white culture disables the development of healthy African-American self-image. The majority, if not all, of Morrison's characters are black. She writes from the ethnic experience she identifies with the most. Her writing is about the black experience, and the narrative style of her novels is authentically black. Yet, her writing is not propaganda. It is most importantly about spreading the awareness about the black minority, whose ethnic existence is threatened by the white society claiming to be its superior.

Stylistically, Morrison's novels complement her political message. She utilizes narrative styles that can be traced back to the African-American storytelling tradition. The aesthetics of language, nature and personal experience filter through her work that thrives to be distinctively black. As well as subject matter, also Morrison's unique style traces back to her personal and cultural background. The author grew up in a black, working-class family in Lorain, Ohio, the town interestingly serving as the setting for The Bluest Eye. Her grandparents were avid storytellers, and her parents brought the influences of rhythm in African-American music into her consciousness. Her upbringing in a household emphasizing ethnic pride and the uniqueness of black culture profoundly influenced her writing style.

Even though Morrison's themes of racism, loss of ethnic identity, poverty and oppression can be viewed as harsh to the blacks and the whites alike, they are embedded into her style that

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[4] Toni Morrison, "Afterword", The Bluest Eye (New York: Penguin, 1994) 210.

softens the edges of the controversial issues. In other words, the manner of Morrison's writing prevents the reader from being totally exhausted by the loaded subject matter. The author's aim is to bring black issues into general awareness, even though she essentially writes about blacks, for black audiences, using inherently black stylistic and structural devices. In The Bluest Eye in particular, the responsibility for the main character's destruction falls on the black and the white society alike. The whites have created the oppressive circumstances, yet the blacks are the ones who have internalized the abuse. None of the author's novels offer definite answers to the problems in them, but they do bring into awareness the issues of the underclass. After Morrison breaks the cycle of ignorant innocence, it is for the reader and the surviving characters to decide what to do.

Morrison's concerns for the black society and the perseverance of its unique culture can be seen throughout her literary work. She always returns to the themes of marginalisation and alienation of blacks in white society. The lack of empowerment and ethnic pride are the major voids she aims to fill for her black audiences. In doing so, Morrison educates the whole society of the uniqueness of her inheritance. Morrison has written eight novels to date: The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988), Jazz (1992), Paradise (1998) and Love (2003). She has also published a book of essays called Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination and edited Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality (1992). Dreaming Emmett (1985) remains Morrison's only play, based on the real life incident of the fatal mutilation of a black boy by white men.

The author's writing remains thematically and stylistically consistent, concentrating on representing African-American culture. The issues of ethnic inequality, black community and individuals' struggle in white society, as well as the empowerment of blacks through the

realization of their rich inheritance, continues to represent themselves in the author's novels. She calls for her audiences, both black and white, to heightened awareness. Morrison's novels form a canon of work that novel by novel deepen the readers' understanding of the black issues of race, and how they have evolved from the past of the African-American experience.

For Morrison, the future of black culture and identity remains in finding empowerment from the past. This is the same inherent empowerment black aesthetic requires from art it values as substantial. My thesis aims to answer the research question of what makes The Bluest Eye black arts literature. I will combine the political and stylistic perspectives of the novel in a multidimensional analysis. This perspective offers a holistic study of The Bluest Eye that is not limited to a narrow critical view. Missy Dehn Kubitschek and Conner have studied Morrison's novels in a manner similar to my analysis.[5]

The structure of my thesis is the following. In chapter two, I will give relevant information on the major black political movements influencing the time around the publication of the novel. Afterwards, I will concentrate on the analysis of The Bluest Eye in chapters three and four. Two major perspectives will be studied. First, how Morrison and the black arts' political concerns manifest themselves in the novel, and secondly, how her stylistic and structural devices contribute to the perseverance of black culture. In chapter five, the perspectives will be revisited, and their intertwined nature is further captured in a synthesis paragraph, followed by my conclusion. Viewpoints of several African-American literature critics, such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Bernard Bell and bell hooks, will be included in the thesis. Commentary from Toni Morrison herself will be added as well.

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[5] Missy Dehn Kubitschek, Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998). See Kubitschek's study of The Bluest Eye 27-46. See also Conner, "Introduction", ix-xxvii.

2. Politics Leading to Black Arts, and Story of The Bluest Eye

A clear, ideological tone can be detected in The Bluest Eye. Since the aim of this thesis is to analyze the novel as black arts literature, it is important to gain understanding of the black aesthetic movement and its background. This chapter first discusses the black power movement; the ideology behind the artistic expression of black arts. Secondly, black women's liberation movement will be discussed, since it originated as a black power movement for women, and Morrison's text has many black feminist undertones. Thirdly, black arts will be discussed, to clarify how the ideologies of the black power and the black women's liberation manifest themselves in the movement that emphasizes the artistic expression of black empowerment. Knowledge of the political influences of the time Morrison wrote her first novel will give a meaningful perspective into her art. The last sub-chapter gives background and introduces the story of The Bluest Eye.

The Bluest Eye was published in 1970, in the midst of turbulent times and strong nationalistic upheaval among blacks. The militant Civil Rights activist Malcolm X had been assassinated in 1965, followed by the 1968 assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the pacifist leader of the civil rights movement. Violence towards blacks was an acute dilemma across the country. The tangible, yet gradual, achievements of King's movement were not satisfactory anymore. King wanted to work towards reconciliation among the races together with the whites. The new black nationalistic groups that emerged wanted to find their strength within the African-American culture, values and community. Black reality became its own entity, unwilling to compromise with any other ideology or ethnic group.

Howard University was one of the major campuses where the student activism for black political nationalism begun in the 1960's. Toni Morrison taught literature at Howard from 1957

to 1964. She admits she was not nationalistically active during the time, however, she had strong views on improving the education system for the blacks: "I didn't know why the assumption was that black children were going to learn better if they were in the company of white children…. Put the money into black neighborhoods, get it there, and we will produce our own excellent faculty, curricula, etc.".[6] Perhaps Morrison did not adopt the specific agendas of the emerging black movements of the time, but she certainly felt the necessity to improve the availability of black literature and the African-American studies programs in educational facilities. Morrison was not a militant activist for the black power. However, her novels address the ideologies of black empowerment and black cultural awareness that were the founding principles of the black nationalist movements. The following sub-chapters illustrate the black power and the black women's liberation movements, and address how the black arts manifests the objects of the two.

2.1. Black Power

The black power movement rose to protest the many acts of violence against the activists involved in the civil rights cause in the 1960's. The leader of the black power was Stokely Carmichael, a former student of Morrison's at Howard. The movement abandoned the ideas of integration with the whites, demanding a new era that would form only on the foundation of African-American heritage, culture and unity. Schools and universities were to change their curriculum to acknowledge the blacks' contributions to the academics, and black communities were to have their own structures separate from the whites. Blackness was beautiful and a new value system was to replace any white ideals that were forcing the blacks into an inferior

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[6] Sandra Adell, Literary Masters Volume 4: Toni Morrison (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2002) 55. Quotation from Rosemarie K. Lester's 1983 interview with Toni Morrison.

position, whether it was due to their skin color, thought processes or ancestry. The movement was militant and arranged numerous riots and demonstrations.[7]

Even though the tangible boundaries of racial segregation were changed during the lenient civil rights movement, the activists of the black power strongly felt that blacks, as well as other racial minorities, were treated like an underclass by the white supremacist society. Howard Cruse, a social critic of the time, wrote on the subject of "domestic colonialism".[8] He pictured blacks as living like the people in developing countries, suffering from degrees of malnourishment, intellectual marginalization and lack of an equal opportunity as individuals contributing to the society. Morrison seems to share Cruse's sentiment in her novels. She writes about blacks as the outcast of the society. "The black community is a pariah community", she states, "…the concept of the black in this country is almost always one of the pariah".[9] In her writing, Morrison illustrates how the survival of the black community is possible only if it adopts and cherishes its own heritage and value system. She continues to echo the principles of the black power movement in her novels, long after the movement integrated into other ideologies.

2.2. Black Women's Liberation

Toni Morrison can easily be read as a black feminist author. The Bluest Eye addresses the issues of domestic violence, rape and incest that were the focus of the black women's liberation movement of the 1970's.[10] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., one of the most respected scholars in African American studies, lists The Bluest Eye as one of the monumental works in black women's literary tradition, together with Toni Cade Bambara's anthology, The Black Woman, Maya

[7] Adell, 54-55.
[8] Bernard W. Bell, The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1987) 237.
[9] Claudia Tate, ed., Black Women Writers at Work (New York: Continuum, 1985) 129. Quotation from Claudia Tate's interview with Toni Morrison.
[10] Kathleen C. Berkeley, The Women's Liberation Movement in America (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1999) 5.

Angelou's I Know why the Caged Bird Sings, and Alice Walker's The Third Life of Grange Copeland.[11] However, Gates also mentions Morrison as an author who has bridged black feminism and black aesthetic.[12] For the purposes of this thesis, Morrison's novel is analyzed as black arts literature, even though the particularly feminist concerns will be addressed in a separate sub-chapter.

The black women's rights movement originated among the female activists of the black power. One of the ideologies of the black power was to establish a patriarchal hierarchy similar to the white society in African-American family structure. Therefore, the women in the movement were not assigned equal responsibilities in the struggle against racial inequality, and they separated from black power. Barbara Smith's Toward a Black Feminist Criticism and Barbara Christian's Black Feminist Criticism clarified the configuration of the movement.[13]

The black women's liberation movement, as well as its white counterpart, can be classified as second-wave feminism. These new, politically and socially active movements emerged in the 1960's from the women's suffrage movement that had originated in the late 1900's.[14] Whereas white women were mostly concerned with entering the workforce and separating themselves from men, the black movement emphasized the oppression of the whole race. Black women's main priority was not financial equality, the women had never had the luxury of staying at home; they had been introduced to the "privilege" of work throughout their lives. Toni Morrison's 1971 article for *The New York Times,* "What the Black Woman Thinks about Women's Lib", illuminates the fundamental differences between the black and the white ideologies. She writes: "The black woman's needs shrank to the level of her responsibility; her man's expanded in

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[11] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology (New York: Penguin, 1990) 2.
[12] Gates, 4.
[13] Hazel Arnett Ervin, African American Literary Criticism, 1773 to 2000 (New York: Twayne, 1999) 436.
[14] Berkeley, 199, 202.

proportion to the obstacles that prevented him from assuming his. White women, on the other hand, have had too little responsibility, white men too much".[15] The black women needed their own ideology, instead of contributing to the white middle-class housewives' empowerment, Morrison concludes.

Black women's liberation needed its own ideology, but was faced with issues far more complicated than its white counterpart. All the African-American people were denied true equality: women, men and children alike. The movement called for unity rather than independence. Jacqueline Jones' book Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow, which narrates the history of the African-American woman, lists dilemmas black women had to face while preparing a productive movement.[16] The first obstacle was addressing black male chauvinism, in a manner preventing separation and alienation between the sexes. The problem did not only exist as a gender issue, but attention had to be paid to the fact that the dominant white society and its value system burdened and stressed the relationship between black men and women. Secondly, highlighting black women's strength without ignoring the fact that they still suffered from racism, overload of responsibilities and poor healthcare. Finally, if the movement was to stay politically strong, it had to join other groups. The challenge was to accomplish integration without compromising the integrity and unique situation of the black woman.

The racial tension between the black and the white movements lessened, and further integration became possible in the 1970's, together with the establishment and influence of the National Women's Political Caucasus. The liberal branch of the women's liberation initiated the group. The Caucasus concentrated on increasing women's power in politics, and was committed

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[15] Adell, 57.
[16] Jacqueline Jones, Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow (New York: Basic, 1985) 317-19.

to fight against "'sexism, racism, institutional violence, and poverty'".[17] Black feminists could find value in trying to influence these more encompassing societal concerns, and found the themes more worthy of attention than the mere struggle between men and women.

Toni Morrison's narratives have a particularly feminist undertone. She follows on the footsteps of Zora Neale Hurston, whose novels have been claimed as "the symbols of a reclaimed [black feminist] literary tradition" by Gates[18]. Margaret Walker, an influential black woman writer herself, mentions more crucial women of the tradition. She acknowledges that Hurston's 1937 novel, <u>Their Eyes Were Watching God</u>, greatly influenced the black women's literary tradition that followed, together with the works of Dorothy West, Ann Petry and Paule Marshall.[19] Gwendolyn Brooks, Rosa Guy, Gayl Jones, Kristin Hunter and Sarah Wright are only a few other names to mention in the growing group of accomplished black women writers today.

Morrison feels strongly about the issues of the black women's liberation movement. The author claims the black woman "had nothing to fall back on: not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself".[20] Especially in her earlier novels, Morrison thrives to illustrate the multifaceted and often harsh conditions of black women, shedding light to their ignored condition in the past. However, her focus is not of a radical feminist.[21] She does not see patriarchy as the sole cause of women's struggles in life. The themes of the author's work lean more towards the issues of racial justice and empowerment.

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[17] Berkeley, 52.
[18] Gates, 9.
[19] Margaret Walker, "Reflections on Black Women Writers", in <u>On Being Female, Black, and Free: Essays by Margaret Walker1932 – 1992</u>, ed. Maryemma Graham (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1997) 44, 50.
[20] Jones, 315.
[21] Berkeley, 202.

2.3. Black Arts/Aesthetic

The black arts, or the black aesthetic, movement was born among the black artists as a response to the ideologies of the black power in the 1960's. The movement was a continuation of the 1920's and 1930's Harlem Renaissance that had begun the tradition of rediscovering the roots of black culture and heritage, dating back to slavery. Some of the major literary figures of the Harlem era included a critic W.E.B. Du Bois, and authors James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes and Nella Larsen.[22] The movement and its key figures influenced the black arts ideologies. However, the latter movement proved to be much more organized, political, and widespread.

Amy Jacques Garvey elaborates on the black power movement's "black is beautiful" theme in a manner that captures the ideals of the black arts movement established thirty years later: "… Then let the canvas come to life with dark faces; let poetry charm the muses with the hopes and aspirations of our race; let the musicians drown our sorrows with the merry jazz; while a race is in the making, and steadily moving on to nationhood and power."[23] The black arts emerged to promote art that illustrated African-American music, language, heritage and beauty. In order to be substantial, art had to have a proudly black subject matter and style; be it a sculpture, a piece of music, a novel or a poem. Empowered by the concepts of the black power, the movement inspired the emergence of black theatre groups, magazines, and printing presses. Publications such as Negro Digest/Black World, and emerging black artists, like poets Nikki Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, provided some of the artistic and political commentary of the time.[24] The theory of the black aesthetic was codified in collected works, such as Larry Neal and Amiri Bakara's

[22] Michael G. Cooke, Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century (New Haven:Yale UP, 1984) 68.
[23] Amy Jacques Garvey, "I Am a Negro – and Beautiful", in William L. Wan Deburg, Modern Black Nationalism (New York: New York UP, 1997), p. 58. Garvey was the wife and assistant of Universal Negro Improvement Association president Marcus Garvey.
[24] William L. Andrews et al. 73.

Black Fire (1968) anthology, and Addison Gayle, Jr.'s collected criticisms Black Expression (1969) and The Black Aesthetic (1971).[25]

Black artists wanted to abandon the Eurocentric models of representing beauty and desirability in artistic expression. They were determined to produce art for the blacks, about the blacks. The ideology encouraged artists to spread awareness about the oppressed and the marginalized position of the blacks. The hardships and the history, but also their cultural perseverance had to be addressed. In the past, especially the black literature seemed to address the white society. Morrison clarifies the aim of the black literary expression before the 1960's: "It was very contestetory, persuasive, and also it seemed to have a voice… to someone outside the community… to persuade, convince, display the art or the argument to white people".[26] The artists' of the new era did not aim to explain the black experience, culture or value systems; they demanded black art to rise and challenge the established Western canon of art.

Literature influenced by the black arts concepts struggled to abandon W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of double-consciousness,[27] which meant blacks were constantly struggling towards the white culture's ideals, even though the dominant society disabled them from reaching the Eurocentric goals. Mirroring themselves against the value structure of the oppressive white society was depriving the blacks of their empowerment. Black writers wanted to concentrate on solving the problems of the African-American community from the inside, developing awareness of the rich black heritage and gearing the community to realize its worth. The time had come for blacks to stop internalizing the image of being the inferior in the society as a whole. The population had to find strength, beauty and self-esteem within.

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[25] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction", Figures in Black (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) xxv.
[26] Matteo Bellinelli, dir., video interview Toni Morrison, New Jersey, Films for the Humanities and Sciences, Princeton, 1994.
[27] Bell, 239. The idea is further studied in connection to Morrison's writing in Heinze, 59-60.The term is especially clarified as a concept affecting black reality.

The black arts, a movement "characterized by acute self-awareness", produced writers like Morrison, Angela Davis, Ishmael Reed, Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker and June Jordan.[28] Morrison is undeniably an author who internalizes the main concerns of the aesthetic. She writes about black oppression, consciousness and tradition. Her major characters' are black and they are in constant search for their ethnic identity. The Bluest Eye tackles the destructiveness of double-consciousness, Sula touches the feminist issues in black culture, Song of Solomon follows a young black man in his search for his roots. Tar Baby presents the irreconcilable differences between white and black culture, while Beloved is a strong slave narrative. Jazz moves the reader to the swinging city life, where blacks are still the underclass. Paradise pictures an isolated black community replacing the love of tradition with hatred, and finally, Love tells a story of a rich black hotel owner and how his wealth affected the community around him. Morrison's narrative angle is ever changing, yet black issues remain her subject matter. She does not avoid painful or complicated themes in her novels about black experience, and she also chooses stylistic devices (see chapter 4) that are faithful to her African-American heritage.

Morrison's style reflects black traditions of storytelling, reciprocity and language. The spoken dialogue in her novels is distinctively black, again confirming the importance Morrison places on her culture's oral traditions. She uses black folklore and mythology in her work as a structural element, affirming her connectedness to black history. She serves as a messenger and a reminder of the rich African-American heritage that has kept the culture alive in the midst of suffering and oppression. In Morrison's opinion, trying to ignore one's history hinders the growth of a healthy and wholesome individual.[29] Her narratives' main purpose is to spread knowledge and awareness, entertainment is not a substantial value for her: "It [the narrative] is, I believe, one of the

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[28] Encyclopedia Britannica's Guide to Black History: Black Aesthetic Movement, 20 May 2005. <http://search.eb.com/Blackhistory/article.do?nKeyValue=2976>.
[29] Bellinelli, Morrison Interview.

principal ways in which we absorb knowledge."[30] Morrison has internalized her responsibility as an author to educate and awaken, rather than offer soothing oblivion and abandonment of ethnic pride.

2.4. Background and Story of The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye is a personal story from Morrison's past, centering on a disturbing memory of her schoolmate who prayed for blue eyes. She began to formulate the story into writing in 1964, while needing material for her literature group.[31] The tale evolved into a book during Morrison's years as an editor for Random House, since the author felt the controversial material needed a larger audience. The Bluest Eye was finally published in 1970, after being rejected by several publishers. The general public showed only moderate interest towards the novel, yet the novel received some favorable reviews by critics. Haskel Frankel found flaws in the coherence of Morrison's book, yet congratulated her for being able to reveal beauty underneath the harshness of the world. L.E. Sissman was impressed by the skill of the novice writer to address black issues beyond generation barriers.[32]

Perhaps the first publication of The Bluest Eye vanished in the general political upheaval of the 1970's and the canon of black women writers' literary criticism was not established enough to analyze the novel to the full extend. No matter which the reason, the novel did not enjoy wide appreciation before being republished in the 1990's. In her 1993 afterword to The Bluest Eye, Morrison concludes that the earlier publication of the novel was like the main character's

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[30] Cheryl Lester, "Meditations on a Bird in the Hand: Ethics and Aesthetics in a Parable by Toni Morrison*",* in Conner, 126.
[31] Ellyn Sanna, "Biography of Toni Morrison", in ed. Harold Bloom, Bloom's BioCritiques: Toni Morrison, (Philadelphia: Chelsea, 2002) 11-13. Sanna narrates the development process of The Bluest Eye.
[32] See both Frankel's and Sissman's reviews of The Bluest Eye in K.A. Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. eds., Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present (New York: Amistad, 1993) 3-5.

tragedy: “dismissed, trivialized, misread”.[33] Today, Morrison and her work are held in high regard among the critics and the public, and she is studied and read in schools around the world.

The Bluest Eye is a tragic tale of African-American suffering, set in Lorain, Ohio. The events in the novel occur within a time span of one year, beginning in the autumn of 1940. The setting is not only significant due to the fact that Morrison grew up in Lorain, it signifies something embedded in the history of the blacks. The northern United States represented an opportunity for the black population of the 1940’s. The booming steel industry and the growing cities promised a change for the better for the southern black who was accustomed to low-paying work in the fields. In many cases, the opportunities did not present themselves when blacks arrived to the north. Work was hard to find, and racist ideologies were strongly present in the minds of the whites and the European immigrants.

The main character of The Bluest Eye is Pecola Breedlove, a 12-year-old black girl. She is unfortunate enough to have parents like Cholly and Pauline Breedlove - an unemployed drunk and a maid who lives in an escapist fantasy. Pecola’s brother Sammy is mentioned only in passing, in his attempts to escape home. Upstairs to the Breedloves is an apartment occupied by three prostitutes, Miss Marie, China and Poland. They offer an interesting counterpart to the community, treating Pecola better than either her parents or the neighborhood would.

The MacTeer family offers a counterpoint to the Breedloves. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer are hardworking people, who take care of their children Claudia and Frieda, even in the midst of hardship in their lives. Claudia acts as the main narrator of the text, remembering the situations from an adult retrospect. Pecola, Claudia and Frieda form a friendship. However, the MacTeer sisters cannot prevent Pecola’s destruction.

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[33] Morrison, “Afterword”, The Bluest Eye, 216.

Pecola is not loved. She does not receive affection at home; she is teased at school and ignored by the community. Pecola begins to think her misery is due to her ugliness; her self-esteem is non-existing. One of the main themes of The Bluest Eye illuminates the major reason the community in the novel is miserable. The neighborhood is mainly black, bombarded by Eurocentric ideals of beauty and worth. Pecola believes she would be happy with blue baby doll eyes; desirable eyes that would make all her sadness and disappointments disappear.

Pecola's life is a constant struggle for psychological survival. At the end, being raped by her own father and becoming pregnant with his child breaks the girl's spirit and she escapes into insanity. Helping Pecola on the way to destruction is the town mystic Soaphead Church, who promises her blue eyes only she could see. At the end of the novel, Pecola's baby is stillborn, and she leads a totally isolated life with her mother who cannot even make herself look at her daughter. Cholly dies after leaving the family and Sammy escapes for the last time.

Morrison's novel is a multifaceted illustration of African-American community's potential of either total failure or survival. She does not offer a flattering picture of the novel's neighborhood as a whole; yet, she shows elements of strength and growth in some of the individual characters. Claudia is able to be skeptical about internalizing the white ideals of self-worth. She and Frieda also try to change Pecola's destiny, showing compassion beyond their years.

The problems of self-hatred and abandoned values in African-American community remain acute concerns for Morrison. The Bluest Eye is her attempt to educate blacks on the hardships and dilemmas touching their lives. As a narrator, Morrison does not judge any of the characters in her novel; she thrives to understand even Cholly, Pauline and Soaphead Church. The author's emphasis on the political realities of black existence, and the authentic African-American presentation connect her to the tradition of black aesthetic. In what follows, The Bluest Eye, its ideology and stylistic devices will be carefully analyzed, in order to arrive into satisfactory

conclusion about the true significance of Morrison's text to the preservation of the African-American consciousness.

3. Political Concerns

In order to study The Bluest Eye as black arts literature, the novel's political themes need to be illustrated. The following sub-chapters clarify how the issues of double-consciousness, racism, black feminism and black community structure present themselves in the text. Even though Morrison's narrative concentrates on the fate of Pecola, she uses the young black girl's story to encourage black political awareness. Addison Gayle, a black arts literature critic, claims that in black arts literature the characters are "warriors in the 'struggle against American racism'".[34] Even though Pecola loses the battle, her sacrifice is too substantial to be ignored. Morrison takes her heroine and embeds her into the reference of African-American political issues. The author does not seek reconciliation with the white community, she aims to make the black community stronger in her narrative that finds political and personal empowerment in the increasing awareness of the problems in black communities.

The decade of 1960 provided new opportunities for the black racial minority, as far as integration to the white society was concerned. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1965, enabling blacks to access public accommodations. A year later, The Voting Rights Act opened the road to the ballots for every adult African-American. In 1968, the Fair Housing Act stipulated that the blacks were allowed to buy houses at the neighborhoods of their choice.[35] However monumental this political empowerment in the white society was for the blacks, it did not lessen the black arts movement's desire to find the power for the black communities within themselves and the African-American heritance. Black authors, especially the women, continued to fight for

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[34]Deborah E. McDowell, "'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's Sula and the Black Female Text", in Nellie Y. McKay, ed., Critical Essays on Toni Morrison (Boston: Hall, 1988) 78.
[35] Lawrence J. Hanks, "The Quest for Black Equity: African-American Politics since the Voting Rights Act of 1965", in William R. Scott and William G. Shade, eds., Upon These Shores (New York: Routledge, 2000), 407.

the vulnerable members of black society whose voices would have remained otherwise unheard. Claudia Tate writes: "Pecola in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye; DeWitt Williams in Gwendolyn Brooks's A Street in Bronzeville; Eva in Gayl Jones's Eva's Man; Beau Willie in Ntozake Shange's For Colored Girls all remind us that for every victor in the American racial wars there is the vanquished, who is too easily forgotten."[36]

In The Bluest Eye, Morrison narrates various ideological dilemmas introduced in the black power and the black women's liberation movements. She concentrates on illuminating how the adoption of white standards and ideals of beauty have corrupted black community. From the black women liberation's point of view, The Bluest Eye is one of the first novels to have a little girl as the central character; Morrison also brings into consciousness the disturbing issue of rape.[37] Her concern for the African-American community is eminent; she finds the position of women and children especially worrisome. Juxtaposing black and white culture's ideological systems provides the author a background on which to examine the perseverance of the oppressed black experience.

Morrison embeds the political issues affecting her characters' lives into a narrative that concentrates on their individual tragedies. In the novel, community and society play a crucial role in influencing people's lives; the characters are especially molded by the values society places on race and gender issues.[38] Connections to culture and heritage have always been held in high regard in the African-American consciousness. The Bluest Eye presents a situation where white culture is seeping into black experience, causing havoc among people struggling for their unity and mere survival.

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[36] Tate, "Introduction", xxiv.
[37] Kubitschek, 30.
[38] Barbara Rigney, "Hagar's Mirror: Self and Identity in Morrison's Fiction", in Linden Peach, ed., Toni Morrison: Contemporary Critical Essays (New York: St. Martin's, 1998) 55.

The novel's black neighborhood is suffering in its feeling of powerlessness. Morrison's goal is to find out the reason's behind the people's and the community's actions. Her narrative is from Claudia's point of view, yet she voices the oppression and difficulties of the whole community. Claudia claims "since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (6). Analyzing the political background behind the text will shed light to the question why the tragedy in the novel happened, and how the novel promotes black empowerment in its themes.

3.1. Double-Consciousness

One of the major tragedies in The Bluest Eye is the black characters' inability to see themselves as both black and American. The value structures of the dominant, white society contribute to the problem, making some of the characters disvalue their African-American heritage and encourage them to long for the unreachable patriarchal and capitalist values of the whites. The black community's existence becomes more complicated and drained when the dominant white society's value system clashes with black ideals and heritage. The dilemma was brought into general awareness through the black power movement, and was originally labeled "double-consciousness" by Du Bois. In his influential 1903 critique The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois describes the problem: "...an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn".[39] In other words, Blacks in America faced the difficulty of balancing the white culture with their African-American heritage. The dilemma of double-conciousness remained an acute concern through the black empowerment movements, from "the publication of James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man (1913) through Ralph Ellison's Invisible

[39] Harold Bloom, ed., "Introduction", Modern Critical Views: W.E.B Du Bois (Broomall, PA: Chelsea, 2001) 1.

Man (1952) to Toni Morrison's Beloved (1988)".[40] The Bluest Eye concentrates on addressing black community's desire to abandon its value system and adopt Eurocentric values of materialism, capitalist success and beauty, and how those desires remain unrealistic, destructive and un-necessary. The Breedloves embody the dilemma of double-consciousness by embracing the white society's ideals and losing sight of the value of their African-American heritage.

In the core of the white value system are the ideas of individualism, capitalism and Protestant work ethic. Denise Heinze analyses the concepts in her book The Dilemma of Double Consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels.[41] She points out that Morrison's writing has an especially negative stance against Protestant work ethic, glorifying God by working hard, since it easily converts to greed in the capitalist society. Heinze stresses the fact that the abovementioned concepts are foreign to black culture. The value system of the African-American community is totally different. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia writes about black values stressed in Morrison's works. She mentions the Afrocentric principles of "collectivism, humanism and egalitarianism", providing an interesting point in claiming that Morrison's major purpose of politically educating the reader is reached by her juxtaposition of the positive African-American values with less desirable Western ideals.[42] Morrison's attempt can be clearly detected in The Bluest Eye, in the manner she portrays the miserable situation of the Breedloves; especially after Pauline Breedlove tries to assimilate to the white ideals.

Cholly and Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's parents, are examples of how difficult the American dream of success is to reach for an African-American, especially in the 1940's. The couple is uneducated, ridiculed by the whites and denied an equal opportunity for work. Cholly is

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[40] SIAC-Official Site, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, The African-American Century: How Black Americans Have Shaped Our Country (New York: Free, 2000) Excerpt, 27 May 2005 <http://www.thesiac.com/main.php?page=person&&item=webdubois>.

[41] Heinze, writing about the concepts of Western individualism, capitalism and protestant work ethic, 105-6.

[42] Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness (Cranbury, NJ: Associated UP, 1991) 22.

employed as a young adult but becomes discouraged by Pauline, who is disappointed with him since he cannot provide her the luxury a white man would (123). Cholly escapes into drinking while Pauline becomes the main breadwinner between the two. She works as a maid for a rich white family, growing addicted to the luxuries in their mansion. “No zinc tub, no buckets of stove-heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in a kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb”, Pauline thinks with delight. “Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house” (127). Cholly and Pauline cannot live with their double-consciousness. They are discouraged by the their inablity to reach the white standards of desirable family structure, which included the financially secure male as the head of the family and the woman who tended the house.[43] Blacks in the 1940’s were denied the access to better paying jobs, making it necessary for both sexes to work for a meaningful survival of the family.

The Breedloves are unable to overcome the conflict of values they face; both Cholly and Pauline are discouraged and defeated by the disappointment they are to themselves and to each other. Their frustrations explode in frequent physical violence, the reasons of which reach much deeper than a mere domestic dispute. “No less did Cholly need her [Pauline]. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires” (42). Pauline despises Cholly for not being her savior, while Cholly hates Pauline because she is the manifestation of his unfulfilled opportunities in life.

The MacTeers are another black family living in the neighborhood. Describing their life, Morrison provides a meaningful contrast to the Breedloves. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer both work hard to provide for their children, Claudia and Frieda. They are not consumed by the unreachable; they concentrate on their reality, no matter how bleak. Claudia describes her father: “Wolf killer

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[43] Heinze, 60.

turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills" (61). While the Breedloves are defeated in their quest for the unreachable capitalist dreams, the MacTeers demonstrate collectivism and perseverance in harsh conditions. They work for the survival of their family, even caring for Pecola when her own family is left without a home. Claudia's family represents Morrison's example of black ideologies' triumph over Eurocentric ideals. The MacTeers are able to balance their double-conscious minds. Instead of constant longing for the unreachable American dream like the Breedloves, the MacTeers embrace their community and their family values.

The black power movement's attempt was to turn the African-American community's concern from trying to conform to the white society to concentrating on black heritage and identity as an ideal base for meaningful life. Morrison illustrates in The Bluest Eye that it requires an immense strength of character to avoid changing one's value system, especially if the majority of the community has already fallen victim to the dominant culture's ideologies. The Breedloves' struggle without a support system; the community enforces their negative vision of themselves. Pecola, in particular, is completely destroyed by the Eurocentric value system. She is sacrificed in her community's and her family's desperate search to confirm into the white ideologies of beauty and worth.

3.2. Beauty Presented Via Institutional Racism and Personal Prejudice

Morrison's major concern in The Bluest Eye is to illuminate the destructiveness of the white beauty standards, and how they affect the African-American community. Eurocentric ideals often connect physical beauty with a sense of worth. In her narrative, she approaches the topic from various angles. Morrison explores the manifestation of institutional racism and personal prejudice as one of the major concerns in the novel. Institutional racism is present in the lives of the

characters via educational system, popular culture and production of items that only cater to the whites. Personal prejudice develops from being exposed to the racist institutions, and internalizing the majority's view of desirability. In The Bluest Eye, the community as a whole has accepted the Western values and considers differences from it a flaw. Throughout the novel, Claudia and Pecola remain a meaningful contrast to each other and the problems of Eurocentrism; one rejecting the Western ideals, the other drowning in her sense of ugliness and worthlessness.

Institutional racism, as Kubitschek clarifies, is the dominant culture's denial of its multicultural nature. The ideals of the minority culture are ignored and not presented in the realms of mass media or at schools, which begins to force the minority to assimilate with the population at large, and devalue its own value system.[44] In the scenario of The Bluest Eye, institutional racism causes confusion and destruction of self-esteem.

The novel begins with a preface from a children's reading assignment for school, called Dick and Jane reader. "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white-house. They are very happy". Both Dick and Jane are white, blond and blue-eyed children. In the Dick and Jane reader, their happiness can be seen as linked to their whiteness. Immediately, a conflict rises between Dick and Jane, who are worth mentioning in a schoolbook, and Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, poor black children who do not live in a static illusion of happiness. The school assignment of the preface is first written with proper punctuation and capitalization. Then it is repeated without capitalization or punctuation. Finally, the text is repeated for the second time, without any punctuation or spacing between the words. The preface gives an indication of the escalating confusion the characters in the novel will be experiencing as they are faced with racial

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[44] Kubitschek, 41.

oppression. Dick and Jane are creations of the white society that determines the material values and desirable appearance for everyone. The blacks do not have public representation in the society. There are no reading assignments about black children who live in poverty. This manifestation of institutional racism contributes to the characters' personal prejudices in the novel, increasing their insecurities and feelings of insecurity and ugliness.

Pecola is deeply affected by the illustrations of white beauty around her. Her home circumstances are miserable enough for her to reach for any kind of relief and acceptance available. She begins to dream about being beautiful and blue-eyed. Pecola's infatuation with aesthetic desirability starts fairly innocently. While at the MacTeers, she grows addicted to the children's Shirley Temple mug and ends up drinking three quarts of milk, just to be able to stare at Shirley's blue eyes and blond, curly hair (19, 23). She even has long talks with Frieda about the wonderful, dreamy Shirley. Pecola also likes Mary Janes, candies that have a picture of a white, blond and blue-eyed girl. "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50). During her parents' violent outbursts, Pecola begins to internalize her wishes to be recognized as beautiful. "If she [Pecola] looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (46). Pecola begins to pray and dream of blue eyes. In her limited experience, she adopts the fallacy that her value depends on her looks.

Claudia, on the other hand, does not share the longing wishes for being white. Her exposure to the white standards of beauty has left her angry and somewhat confused. When she receives a white, blue-eyed baby doll for Christmas, she is revolted, rather than pleased:

> I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.

> Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs-all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured (20).

Even as a 9-year-old, Claudia is able to make critical distinctions within her environment. She recognizes the institutional racism around her, even if she cannot name the problem. The mass media bombards the black community with white images of beauty, making it harder for the minority to maintain its own identity and worth, since no public presentations of black ideals or role models are available. Claudia's observations become even more meaningful, when she thinks about Shirley Temple; the beautiful, white girl actress Pecola and Frieda adore. "I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). Claudia is angry because Bojangles is a black man, and he dances with Shirley in one of her movies, with the crowd around them cheering and smiling. Bojangles is one of Claudia's kind; therefore it is hard for her to understand why he chooses to dance with Shirley rather than herself. Claudia's anger, together with her healthier home life, saves her from living in an illusion like Pecola does.

Pecola has naivety and youth to defend her, but her mother Pauline is a grown woman destroyed by institutional racism. Pauline is a southern black woman who walks with a limp. After she moves to the north with her husband, Cholly, her sudden exposure to the white value system begins to burden her. Her foot becomes a symbol of unattainable beauty, together with her lost front tooth. Pauline cannot relate to the northern blacks and she is not used to living among whites. Cholly grows distant and violent towards Pauline who escapes into the movies. The cinematic resort of Pauline's days begins to corrupt her value system. "Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another- physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in

disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind… and collected self-contempt by the heap" (122). Morrison is not coy in her description of the white values she categorizes disabling. Pauline and Cholly seem happy when they remain in the south. They face an alternate reality in the north. The culture and the people are different, and without any support from the community around them, their insecurities feed off of the trivial values of beauty and material success. The Breedloves come to believe they are unattractive and undesirable. "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" (39). Especially Pauline is continuously defeated by her surroundings, and she transfers her heritage of ugliness to her daughter, Pecola.

When Pauline looks at her firstborn, she seals Pecola's faith. "But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (125). Pauline views herself as unattractive beyond doubt, and her influence on her daughter is extremely damaging. Both Pauline and Pecola's image of themselves comes from the outside; twisted by the society that promotes blue-eyed, white baby-dolls and beautiful white actresses on screen. Pauline's lack of emotions for Pecola is clearly depicted in the scene where her daughter helps her to wash laundry in the white mansion. Pauline, or Polly, as her white employers prefer to call her, has made a blueberry pie. Claudia, Frieda and the employers' little girl are in the kitchen when Pecola accidentally drops the pie on the floor. Polly arrives the scene and hits Pecola several times, knocking her on the floor. When the little white girl begins to cry, Polly comforts her and ignores Pecola's pain. The black girls leave the scene: "As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl" (109). Pecola is defeated, whereas Claudia is infuriated by the fact that the white girl calls Pauline Polly, while even her own children always refer to her as Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline has developed a false sense

of self-worth as Polly the perfect servant, and she guards her position fiercely. During her days at the mansion, she is someone else, a respected employee, surrounded by luxuries and beauty. In the kitchen, with the ruined pie, Pecola is an unnecessary reminder of her meaningless life beyond the mansion. Pecola is black and ugly, the facts that Pauline wants to forget about herself. She denies Pecola's rights for love and caring, and her daughter internalizes her mother's sense of worthlessness and ugliness. "As long as she [Pecola] looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people… Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored and despised at school, by teachers and schoolmates alike" (45). Pecola wants to escape her oppressive home-life, yet her encounters in the larger community only enforce the disturbing messages of beauty and worth embedded into her consciousness by her mother.

The community in The Bluest Eye has adapted to the institutional racism they are exposed to, and has formed a black hierarchy based on skin color. The personal prejudice of Pecola's classmates and teachers is a drastic example of the decay of her environment. Pecola is the only child who sits alone at her desk. The teachers ask her questions very seldom, and the children at the schoolyard yell someone "loves Pecola Breedlove", if they want to insult each other (45-6). The false standards of beauty manifest at the school, especially after Maureen Peal arrives. Maureen is a new, light-skinned student.

> She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (62).

Maureen is not white; yet, she is light enough to be considered beautiful according to the Eurocentric standards, with her long, brown hair. Her beautiful clothes add to her attractiveness. Claudia and Frieda name her "Meringue Pie" (63), attempting to devalue her immense popularity

at school. But when Maureen offers to walk home from school with Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, they accept. Pecola is fascinated and grateful when Maureen buys her ice cream. Afterwards, the girls begin to argue, and Maureen calls Claudia's father black and indicates that Pecola has seen her own father naked. Insulted by the lighter skinned girl, Claudia tries to hit Maureen, who escapes to the other side of the street. "Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, 'I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute'" (73). Maureen knows their school and the whole community consider her beautiful. Even though the girls are young, the white society's standards have had a negative affect on them. They judge themselves by standards foreign to their heritage and fail to see their own beauty, since black beauty ideals are not represented in the society around them.

To be beautiful is to be light-skinned and rich. The ultimate happiness is whiteness and blue eyes. Morrison strongly attacks this self-image promoted by institutional racism and personal prejudice, showing it destroying the community's weakest members, especially Pecola. The physically and mentally abused black girl has no strength to face her reality; she escapes to the fantasy land of Dick and Jane, blond Shirley Temple and sweet Mary Jane. Even Pecola's own mother denies her the feeling of uniqueness, the look of love that would be only for her, for her own sake. Claudia is an exceptional child to see beyond the white images enforced on them, yet she is too young to make a difference for her friend's self-esteem and meaningful survival as a black girl.

3.3. Colorism and Racial Self-hatred

The black power movement's 1960's slogan, "Black is beautiful", is very much an unrealized concept in the world of The Bluest Eye. In Morrison's narrative, many blacks are burdened by their blackness; they hope they can change their race, or even some of their inherently black

features. The community in the novel has developed a hierarchy of skin-color tones. Colorism, defined by Alice Walker as the "'prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color'", is a daily reality for the characters in The Bluest Eye.[45] The lighter the skin, the more respectable a person becomes. People victimize Pecola because she is very black. The destructiveness of colorism has affected her family, schoolmates and adults she encounters in her daily life. Whites and the lighter colored blacks claim a superior position, causing the dark blacks to hate and be ashamed of their color.

Heinze claims that Morrison detests this manifestation of colorism in the black community to the extent of being convinced it prevents the healthy development of African-American community.[46] Morrison's concern of colorism causing racial self-loathing is very adamant. She depicts several characters who are totally willing to abandon their "blackness" for being more accepted in the larger society. Tar Baby's Jadine, Song of Solomon's Mr. Dead and Sula's title character all feel powerful when they place themselves superior to their black cultural heritage. Pecola's daily encounters explain how the whites and the light-skinned blacks enforce the debilitating color hierarchy in The Bluest Eye.

Pecola cannot escape colorism around her. Her parents hate their skin color; her schoolmates have developed a "contempt for their own blackness" (65), which frequently erupts in aggression towards Pecola, the blackest of them all. Yet, the adults' treatment of Pecola is even more defeating for her, since they already have a superior position due to their age and maturity. When Pecola ventures into Mr. Yacobowski's general store, the white immigrant man does not even recognize her presence. "Yet this vacuum is not new to her…[Pecola thinks]... She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things

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[45] Heinze, 18. Walker's quote in Alice Walker, In Search of Our Mother's Gardens, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 290.

[46] Heinze, 21-2. The author discusses colorism in black communities - as presented by Morrison.

in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread" (49). Mr. Yacobowski does not see Pecola because she is not worth seeing for him. When Pecola leaves the store with her purchase of Mary Jane candies in their blue-eyed, white girl wrapper, she feels ashamed and defeated. The older man has injured her self-perception and human worth. Symbolically, the white immigrant sells Pecola racial hatred, ignoring her and giving the poor black girl unattainable useless dreams through the white Mary Janes.

Another example of racial self-contempt and internalized racism in the community is Geraldine, Pecola's schoolmate Junior's mother. Geraldine is a light-skinned black and very particular about keeping her distance from the dark and poor blacks. She also makes sure her son does not associate with the common black children. "She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers…. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (87). Geraldine has developed a hierarchy in her head; she wants to seem as "white" as possible. When Junior lures Pecola into his home and lies to his mother that the girl has injured Geraldine's precious black cat, the woman is infuriated. She has categorized Pecola as inferior, and does not appreciate the reminder of her own heritage. She negates the child in her hatred of her own ancestry. Geraldine knows where to place Pecola and her kind: "They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled… 'Get out', she said, her voice quiet. 'You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house'" (92). Pecola is too black to come to Geraldine's house; she is not worthy company for the well-dressed, yet vicious Junior. From an early age, the boy has learned his mother's value system and feels superior, whereas Pecola's mother and her surroundings continue to contribute to her self-loathing.

Pecola's final encounter on her road to destruction is Soaphead Church, the town mystic. Morrison depicts his colorist nature with great detail, beginning from his ancestry over a century earlier. Dissented from a mix of a West Indian woman and her noble British lover, Soaphead's

family line has struggled to maintain its lighter bloodline. They have been careful to separate themselves "in body, mind and spirit from all that suggested Africa; … they married 'up,' lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features" (168). Later, some family members even marry each other, rather than being exposed to the possibility of the family line becoming any darker. Even though this practice produces family members with mental problems, it was considered to be worth it, in order to keep the family's outer appearance more appealing to the white society.

When Pecola knocks on Soaphead's door, she is desperate. She is afraid of him, yet she thinks he is her only hope for survival. Soaphead feels that her request for blue eyes is very logical. "Of all the wishes people had brought him… this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (174). Soaphead decides to play God and use her naivety at the same time. He gives Pecola poisoned meat, to give to a dog he wants dead. If the dog acts in an odd manner afterwards, it will be Pecola's sign that her wish has come true. The dog dies and Pecola believes she now has blue eyes, visible only to her. Soaphead's superiority complex is revealed in his letter to God: "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!" (182). Soaphead has been lost in his high education and light-skinned pride, to the extent of feeling justified to play God to a helpless black girl. When Pecola's baby is stillborn, she escapes into illusions and hallucinations, actually believing she has blue eyes.

Pecola's insecurity and self-loathing is imminent from the very beginning of the novel. The encounters on her way to destruction strengthen her feeling of worthlessness. Her wish for blue eyes moves beyond her desire to be beautiful. The eyes represent an ability to be loved and recognized as a human being in her community. Yet, since her town as a whole has equated

blackness with undesirability, "she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (46-7). Mr. Yacobowski's eyes even refuse to recognize her presence; Geraldine and Junior look at her with loathing and superiority in their eyes. Even Soaphead Church damages her, because in his eyes Pecola is not a human being; he uses her as a tool to kill a dog and is willing to push her into insanity. Pecola is defeated, time and time again. Claudia observes her crumbling personality: "She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes" (73-4). Pecola's personality is not allowed to develop in her community and she cannot love herself, since no one inside the community loves her. Her eyes present the depth of her misery and the self-loathing of the whole community.

3.4. Black Feminist Concerns

Patricia Hill Collins, a leading scholar in black feminist studies, claims, "[b]lack women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice".[47] Morrison agrees with Collins' statement, illustrating how the struggle in black women's life culminates in the inequality between the blacks and the whites, as opposed to inequality between men and women that was the main concern of the white feminist movement of the 1960's and 1970's. The author pictures the harsh conditions of black women, without separating them from the oppressed situation of the whole minority. Her novels illuminate "ethnic cultural feminism", concentrating distinctly on black feminist issues, rather than examining women's position in the society at large.[48] She also examines how the white society has affected the relationships between black men and women. In

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[47] Patricia Hill Collins, Black Sexual Politics (New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.
[48] Carolyn Denard, "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison", in McKay, 171-2.

The Bluest Eye, Cholly and Pauline's inability to reach the American dream of success creates pressure that releases as violence in their marriage. However, Morrison's particular concern in The Bluest Eye is the plight of black children, since the issues of society, community, neighborhood and families mold their susceptible personalities. The author offers a realistic view of the characters, which has been applauded by black feminist critics, such as Barbara Christian and Mary Helen Washington.[49]

Morrison narrates the differences between the white and the black women's situation in a scene where Pauline remembers her argument with her white employer. Pauline's reality is far from the white middle-class woman's world: "[S]he told me I shouldn't let a man take advantage over me. That I should have more respect, and it was my husband's duty to pay the bills, and if he couldn't, I should leave and get alimony… I seen she didn't understand that all I needed from her was my eleven dollars to pay the gas man so I could cook"(120-1). Being different in race and class, Pauline's and the white lady's concerns in life are very different. Originally, these kinds of dilemmas prevented the black and the white women's liberation movements from integrating. White women wanted to step into the working world as they chose and be considered equal to men. Black women had been forced to work beside their husbands for the mere survival of their families. They were not concerned about getting even with their husbands, they were worried about putting food on the table.

Another concern of the black women's liberation movement was how to analyze the black men and women's relationship with each other, simultaneously taking into consideration the affects of the dominating white culture on that union. bell hooks, a black feminist critic, states, "white supremacist patriarchy" can be seen as the underlying reason for male initiated domestic

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[49] Bell, 242.

violence, as the men try to regain their lost social control and power.[50] Cholly and Pauline Breedloves' marriage is an example of how patriarchal struggles for domination affect black marriage. Cholly's relationships with Pauline and his daughter Pecola are both destroyed by his sense of powerlessness and his misguided attempts to gain power and control. At an early age, white men ridicule Cholly, when they find him trying to make love to a black girl, Darlene. The situation leaves Cholly defeated and angry, since he cannot defend himself against grown white men. He directs his hatred towards Darlene, "[t]he one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight" (151). Cholly's love towards Pauline turns to hatred also, after he realizes he cannot make her happy or financially secure; he is an uneducated black man lacking a decent upbringing. Pauline grows to despise Cholly's drinking and unemployment: "Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross" (126-7). The Breedloves are victims of unfulfilled dreams and disappointments; they cannot achieve what they want in the white society and their marriage is drastically affected by their disillusionment. The Breeloves have failed in life and in their companionship. However, Morrison presents a lasting, functional union between the MacTeers. She also sheds light onto various strong female characters.

Mrs. MacTeer, the prostitutes living above the Breedloves, and Claudia are Morrison's feminist, capable women in <u>The Bluest Eye</u>. As pointed out earlier, Mrs. MacTeer is a strong character, managing work, poverty and her children with dedication and persistence. She is burdened by her responsibilities; yet, never chooses to give up. She has little love to give with words, but with her actions she qualifies her children's existence. In a scene where Claudia is sick, her mother expresses her anger towards the child and the disease. Claudia recalls, however: "in the night, when my cough was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repined the

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[50] bell hooks, <u>Feminism Is for Everybody</u> (Cambridge, MA: South End) 64-5.

flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die" (12). Mrs. MacTeer's perseverance for her children is imminent; she would do anything for her family's survival and protection.

Claudia, the retrospective narrator of the novel, displays great female insight and intelligence. She receives care at home and she matures to become an individual who genuinely cares for other people. Even as a child, Claudia sees beyond the racism and the prejudice in her community, and in the white society as a whole. She tries to protect the weak, especially Pecola, refusing outside influences to alter her convictions. Claudia even wishes for Pecola's child's survival: "More strongly than my fondness of Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live - just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals" (190). Claudia is a rebel who feels the need to change the whole social order. She is only 10 years old at the time of Pecola's destruction; yet, she is deeply impacted by her friend's plight. In the retrospective narrative, Claudia critically dissects the community's corruption and ignorance.

Furthermore, the prostitutes upstairs the Breedloves' offer another female perspective. They do not need men; they use them. Miss Marie, China and Poland conduct their profession with humor, freedom and arrogance. "[T]hese women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination…. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever-all were inadequate and weak" (56). The prostitutes steal money from their clients, and even occasionally beat them. They offer an opposing viewpoint on traditional depiction of prostitutes. Miss Marie and her co-workers are neither helpless objects of male desire, nor victims of unfortunate circumstances. They have chosen their way of life themselves and live in relative wealth, without regrets. Morrison uses the three women as an insightful contrast to some of the more respected individuals in the novel. Interestingly enough, the prostitutes display more

amiable character traits than most of the other adults in the novel. They are honest, straightforward and most of all, even somewhat affectionate towards Pecola.

Morrison takes a stance for feminist writing by the choice of her main character, Pecola, a 12-year-old black girl. Pecola's destruction is a demonstration of patriarchal culture of domination, where adults think they are allowed to rule their children despotically.[51] Morrison wants to show how deep children's experiences can be and how they can easily be destroyed by their surroundings. Claudia describes the experience of being a black girl in the world: "Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly into the major folds of the garment" (17). The adults in the community do not enrich the girls' lives. "Adults do not talk to us-", Claudia states, "they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information" (10). In the poor community of The Bluest Eye, the adults are drowning in work and their effort to survive, to the extent of being unable to educate the children. Therefore the children mainly develop and grow through their unguided experiences.

The most delicate feminist issue Morrison highlights in her novel is rape. Pecola is raped by her father and her parents' reactions are juxtaposed with the MacTeers' reaction to a man assaulting Frieda. Cholly rapes Pecola out of drunkenness, desperation and anger. "What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit" (161-2). Cholly's twisted way to show love to his daughter causes him to rape her. When Pecola tells Pauline what happened, she beats her. Cholly rapes Pecola again; still Pauline offers no support to her daughter. She does not save her from the father's destructive influence and violation; on

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[51] hooks, 2000, 73.

the contrary, her hatred towards Pecola only intensifies. Frieda's parents have a totally different reaction, when their roomer, Mr. Henry, violates Frieda by touching her breasts (100). Frieda's mother begins to scream at Mr. Henry after she learns what has happened; her father throws a bicycle at the roomer and fires a gun at him. By their reaction to Frieda's traumatizing experience, the MacTeers verify her value as a human being and as a member of their family. They also show strength and commitment to protect Frieda and guide their children into adulthood.[52] The Breedloves, on the other hand, are not capable or willing to commit to the care of their children. They destroy Pecola, both physically and mentally, till she feels without any human value. Morrison does not shy away from describing the drastic and multi-layered affects of rape and incest to the victim, especially a helpless child. She brings the issue into general consciousness; showing the community's ignorant reaction to Pecola's rape, as well as illustrating her mental destruction after her baby dies.

The Bluest Eye is a novel heavy with female experiences. Morrison visits several issues of the black women's liberation movement, concentrating her overall theme of white society affecting the black experience in a negative manner. She does not avoid the difficult subjects of rape and violent marital distress in her narrative. However, she balances Pecola's and Pauline's tragic experiences with positive female models of strength. Claudia's deep understanding of society at an early age promises hope for the African-American woman. Together with her mother Mrs. MacTeer, Claudia portrays strength of character, abandonment of Eurocentric values and perseverance crucial to the survival of the whole black culture.

[52] Kubitschek, 39-40.

3.5. Failing Community

In Morrison's Lorain, Ohio, the community has lost its purpose. With the exception of the MacTeers, The Bluest Eye's characters actively abandon the African values of communal caring, importance of family and reliance to heritage. Morrison uses the neighborhood in The Bluest Eye as a warning of the possible destruction of the African-American community. The neighborhood of the novel does not care enough to save its weakest members, and most of the characters are mainly concerned about their individual well-being. The Breedloves, especially Pecola, are easy targets of the community's wrath and its despise of black people.

The black power movement's ideals of the internally strong and unified African-American community are dead in Morrison's novel. In her fiction, the blacks have been deprived of the ability to portray a public self-image, which in turn has made them accept their role as oppressed objects in the society.[53] The black community is continually devalued by the Eurocentric values the popular culture presents. They do not see blacks on the billboards, movies or schoolbooks, as if the society as a whole did not even recognize their existence. Blacks seem to have the wrong skin color for success in life; they are uneducated, poor and void of deep emotions.

The whites' bias towards the blacks can be clearly detected when Pauline goes to the hospital to give birth to Pecola. The doctor and his interns come to examine Pauline, and converse with each other. "When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses" (124-5). Pauline is left stunned by the doctor's words. Nevertheless, with the combination of all the Western influences in life, she accepts the imposed view of herself. She is not beautiful or valuable to herself anymore. The only happiness she finds is in pretending to be someone else at her white employer's mansion. Pecola also accepts her position as a victim in the community. She does not defend herself against her

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[53] Cynthia A. Davis, "Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrision's Fiction", in Peach, 31.

abusive schoolmates. She stays quiet when Junior lies to his mother that she has injured Geraldine's precious cat. The community further damages Pecola, because it has internalized its worthlessness as a pariah in the larger society.

According to Thomas March, Morrison's novels offer an interplay between an individual and the communities around him. The members of the community are molded by their surrounding culture, whereas the community relies on the same people for its own existence.[54] Pecola's community is effortless and defeated. The Eurocentric models of living have replaced whatever was meaningful before. Foreign standards of beauty, worth and success have permeated people's minds. The altered standards can be easily seen in the scene where Claudia wishes for a traditional experience for Christmas, instead of a cold, white and blue-eyed baby doll. "'I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone.' The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterwards" (22). Instead of something familiar and valuable, Claudia is given a gift that represents foreign culture and values. She is not given a chance to express her ethnicity and love for tradition and familiarity. The society at large has so influenced Claudia's parents and her whole community that they honestly think white baby doll is something more valuable than a pleasant evening in grandmother's kitchen. This is where The Bluest Eye signifies the failure of its community. Everything desirable seems to come from outside the people's personal experience. Since no one places significance to the potentially rich culture inside himself or herself, the surrounding society replaces their value system, leaving them lost. The community loses its cohesion and structure because the individuals do not have a feeling of belonging.

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[54] Thomas March, "Filling in the Gaps: The Fictional World of Toni Morrison", in Bloom, 2002, 41.

Morrison's black community is especially harsh towards its weakest members, the Breedloves. Interestingly enough, they live in an abandoned store with a large window facing the street. Symbolically, it would seem impossible for the neighborhood to ignore the display of human suffering Pauline, Cholly and Pecola present. Yet, no one cares. Cholly is violent, drunk and unemployed. Pauline is equally violent, even towards her own children. Pecola is abused, defeated and lost. The neighborhood is fully aware of their plight; still they do not interfere with the situation. No helping hands are offered even after Cholly rapes his own daughter, Pecola. The neighborhood's reaction is mean gossip about the Breedloves and their flaws (189). There are even suggestions that Pecola brought the rape upon herself; she did something to provoke her father. Claudia and Frieda are disillusioned and saddened by these reactions. Claudia voices their concerns: "And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it. 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). The MacTeer girls are the only members of the community who have compassion for Pecola. They present a slight chance of hope for the novel's lost community. The neighborhood that judges without helping even an innocent, abused child is bound to fail. At the end of the novel, Cholly is dead and Pecola lives at the edge of town with her mother. The placement of the Breedloves from their storefront existence to the peripheral vision of the town is meaningful. In the beginning, they are actively ignored sores in the townspeople's eyes; in the end they are pushed aside as reminders of something people are tired of gossiping about. Morrison illustrates the Breedloves' destruction skillfully, binding it together with the decay of the community around them. Especially Pecola's defeat crushes the community because she is an innocent child who is robbed of her life.

Claudia's depiction of Pecola's destruction in the failing community is poignant:

> All of us - all who knew her - felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us believe we were eloquent…. Even her waking dreams we used - to silence our own nightmares (205).

The community sacrifices Pecola in a failing attempt to save itself from being overrun by white oppression. The blacks do not understand, though, that the only way of meaningful survival is the preservation of their own culture and values. The old traditional African community would have not abandoned Pecola and judged her from the sidelines when she was being abused and ridiculed. Pecola's neighborhood has fragmented enough to believe that Pecola is not one of them; they use her as a victim of their own aborted desires and dreams. The white society is destroying the black community; therefore the blacks are driven to attack the Breedloves. Morrison criticizes the community for failing to protect Pecola's existence and instead trying to be as white as possible.[55]

At the end of The Bluest Eye, suffering and carelessness leave the black community without answers or direction. Morrison states herself: "I write about the things I don't have any resolutions for".[56] She does not offer much hope for the town as it is described in the novel. The last lines of the novel echo the total destruction of both the community and Pecola, as the people see her digging in the trash at the edge of town. Claudia laments: "We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (206). The majority of the people in The Bluest Eye have lost connection to their heritage, their humanity and their willingness to collectively care about their surroundings. They do not interfere with their neighbors' suffering; they do not challenge the racist and oppressive value system forced on them by the white society.

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[55] Heinze, 69.

[56] Tate, 130. Quotation from Tate's interview with Toni Morrison.

Morrison's characters and her community have internalized their position as objects in life and they feel too burdened to break free.

However bleak the novel's community seems, Morrison does offer it an alternative future. Through the examples of perseverance and caring by the MacTeers, Morrison asks the community and the individuals in it to try their hardest to improve the quality of their lives. She underlines the importance of finding strength from within the community, rather than looking outside for answers. She does not solely blame the black pariah community for its decay; she includes the society as a whole in the circle of responsibility. She does not have the answers to improve the society's situation and for Pecola every effort is already too late. But she wishes that somewhere in the world there were enough people like Claudia, who are aware of the destruction of society and who spread the awareness of the conditions of the oppressed and the violated. Those individuals seem to be her only hope. Through her writing, Morrison displays her willingness to preserve the African-American community; she does not wish the basic, good values of old black communities to be totally forgotten in the whirlwind called Western civilization.[57]

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[57] Elizabeth Ann Beaulieau, ed., The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia (Westport, Connecticut, 2003) 85-8.

4. Stylistic and Structural Devices

Influential black aesthetic critics, such as Houston A. Baker Jr., Addison Gayle Jr., and Stephen Henderson, brought new attention to the "language of the text" in African-American literary criticism in the 1960's and 1970's.[58] Not only was the political message of the black arts significant, but also the manner in which the message was delivered could forward black empowerment. In the following sub-chapters, some of The Bluest Eye's stylistic and structural emphases will be illustrated, in order to show how Morrison's choices of literary presentation strengthen her connection to the black arts.

The black arts movement was adamant about abandoning the white models of aesthetic norm. Producing art for the black, the African-American aesthetic concentrated on representing black experience and presenting a unique culture. Morrison aims to write novels using language that is free of oppressive politics of white culture. "Sexist language, racist language, theistic language - all are typical of the policing languages of mastery, and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas".[59] Morrison's message is ideological and her presentation is geared towards blacks. She wants to educate and share awareness in her writing style, finding it crucial to use black styles of presentation in her work. Like a true preserver of culture, she does not allow African-American tradition to be forgotten.

True to the influences of the black arts movement, Morrison's style is characteristically African-American. She thrives to use stylistic devices that derive from her ancestry and heritage. The call-and-response style of narrative she utilizes dates back to the era when the slaves were not allowed to be educated and the only way for them to transfer knowledge was by storytelling

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[58] Gates, 1987, "Introduction", xxviii.
[59] Adell, 109, from Morrison's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1994.

and singing. Morrison also uses specifically black dialects when her black characters converse with each other. She does not make an effort to explain the language or her narrative methods to anyone outside the black community. Her powerful style and language invite to study her novels from various angles, beyond the ideological message she displays. The message is made stronger and deeper by her exploration of the African-American style in her narrative. Even though the content of her novels clarifies the condition of the whole society, the nuances in her writing can be seen in the specific portrayal of individual search and suffering. Morrison wants to illustrate the beauty of life, even through hardship. The more painful her character's situation, the more poetic and expressive her writing becomes, making the text more approachable. The author's style brings a feeling of hope to the characters' harsh situations. Her style narrates a world beyond her message, a world rich with African-American culture, even if that presentation is forbidden in the concrete framework of the reality of her characters.

4.1. Black Storytelling Tradition

One of the major narrative techniques Morrison uses to convey an authentic African-American experience is a style that utilizes old, black storytelling traditions. She uses various methods to make the reader feel that he or she is intimately involved in the story of The Bluest Eye, as if the reader would have personally witnessed the tragedy of the novel. This makes Morrison a skillful storyteller. As previously stated, she uses the call-and-response style of communication that initiates from the time of slavery. The style originally developed among slaves, as a single caller, or a singer, began a story and the listening community responded and agreed vocally to the narrative.[60] Blacks were not taught to read or write during slavery; they were denied any artistic

[60] Malaika Mutere, "African Oral Aesthetic", African Storytelling, 28 May 2005, excerpt <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/afrstory.htm>.

way of presenting themselves. Singing and stories were not only a way of entertainment for the slaves; they provided a crucial opportunity to forward information and culture. Morrison uses the methods of storytelling on many levels in her narrative, giving a voice to several silenced issues of oppression. She allows the characters to come alive as participants in the story by continuously changing her focalization within the narrative. This also draws the reader into the story more intimately, as the non-chronological revealing of Pecola's story, and the alternating focus on different characters has one paying attention, participating and reacting to the novel. The feeling of intimacy Morrison aims to convey in her writing resembles African-American storytelling, where the caller and the audience formed one, communicating unit.[61]

The story of The Bluest Eye involves the reader in its call-and-response style, forcing one to take a personal stance towards one's newfound consciousness. Ultimately, Morrison wants the reader to disagree with Claudia, when she states: "It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (206). Using several stylistic and structural devices discussed below, Morrison forms a dialogue between the reader and the text. John F. Callahan claims that call-and-response "is a name for the evolving dialogic forms of democracy".[62] He continues by explaining the depth of his view: "Writers, readers, and citizens of every background, characteristic, and persuasion: each and every one are called to answer that still reverberating American question: Who are we for"? Morrison seems to echo this question in her narrative from a black American point of view. She does not blame her audience for the tragedies in her novel; however, after being enlightened with the reality of the oppressed, she asks the reader to acquire an active responsibility in preventing the situation from happening again. In a true democracy, everyone has a voice and importance. Morrison voices the

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[61] John F. Callahan, In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-century Black Fiction (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988) 17.
[62] Callahan, 263.

issues of those whose oppression is so total that it is not seen or heard. She wants one to be affected and challenged by her narrative; instead of only being entertained. "… We're taught to read them [books] like you open a medicine cabinet and get out an aspirin and your headache is gone", Morrison claims; the readers are"… looking for easy, passive, uninvolved and disengaged experiences – television experiences, and I won't, I won't do that".[63]

Marilyn Sanders Mobley illustrates three significant functions of the African-American storytelling tradition that can be identified in Morrison's narratives.[64] First, stories were told to affirm the identity of the oppressed. Secondly, they conveyed information to people who were denied knowledge and schooling. Last, and perhaps most importantly, storytelling provided an opportunity to reconcile with the past and the feeling of being a part of a coherent and unified community. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison addresses each of the abovementioned functions in her narrative. She names the oppressed characters in her novel, bringing their despair into general consciousness. The novel affirms Pecola's identity, since no one else will hear her voice. Cholly and Pauline are identified not only as unfit parents, but also people whose potential goodness was destroyed by the oppressive society. Through the individual characters in The Bluest Eye, Morrison also educates the reader about the problems of the African-American community as a whole, and the underlying reasons for its struggle. For Morrison, the final reconciliation with the past means not forgetting about even the most painful chapters in black experience. "The past is more infinite than the future…. It's avoiding it, deceiving ourselves about it, that paralyzes growth".[65] Therefore, Morrison brings forth Pecola's story, in order for the black community to recognize the problems in its midst and gain new awareness of the past that affects their present.

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[63] Adell, 107. Quotation from an interview with Toni Morrison in 1986.
[64] Marilyn Sanders Mobley, Folk Roots and Mythic Wings (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1991) 14.
[65] Bellinelli, Morrison interview.

Ultimately, Morrison moves beyond the informative functions of storytelling. She works to "provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate".[66] The narrative structure of The Bluest Eye calls for the reader to concentrate on personally constructing and participating in the unfolding of Pecola's story. Claudia, a young black girl, narrates the book retrospectively. However, an omniscient narrator is also present to provide different perspectives for the reader.[67] This type of narrative technique allows Pecola, Pauline, Claudia and Soaphead Church each have their dedicated sections in the book that clarify their personal thoughts and development. Morrison uses this change in her narrative focus as a resource to widen the perspective of the book. To provide only the perspective of the young girls would be a rather limited approach. By giving space for narrating each of the major characters in her novel, Morrison gives the reader a chance to understand the whole reason for Pecola's destruction. After one is informed of Pauline's desperate search for beauty, Cholly's thoughts after the defeat he suffers in his boyhood and Soaphead's pretentious family tree, the novel becomes more than a tragic tale of Pecola. Morrison opens discussion to the suffering of the community, even the society as a whole. Her narrative prevents the reader from drawing a quick, factual conclusion or judgment about what happens in the novel. At the end, one is exposed to a multitude of personal narratives that demand fuller understanding and participation. Morrison's authentic style is "a series of storytelling events that recover and reconstruct the past, and ultimately, as a vehicle that can best enable the various audiences within the text, the reader, and the culture at large to be transformed".[68]

In addition to her use of various types of narratives, Morrison includes the reader by providing a non-chronological timeline for her novel. At the beginning, one discovers what has happened to

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[66] Mobley, 20.
[67] Kubitschek, 32.
[68] Mobley, 17.

Pecola. However, the act of rape occurs towards the end of the novel. The Bluest Eye's chapters are not constructed along a logical timeline. For example, following the chapter about Pecola helping her mother with the wash is a chapter illustrating Pauline's younger years. A chapter telling Cholly's story that culminates in him raping Pecola follows Pauline's chapter. By narrating the chapters in the abovementioned manner, Morrison gives the reader a puzzle, one piece at a time. The reader is enabled to personally construct the story for him or herself. At the beginning, one is offered the fact of what happened. At the end, Morrison develops a multifaceted story that has many round characters with personal tragedies. One can perceive the narrative from various perspectives that change during the reading experience. Like a genuine storytelling event, Morrison's narrative illustrates how the narrator, story and the audience are never in a static situation; each element is transformed during the reading experience.[69] Her style enables the characters to take turns in stepping to the foreground and voice their history and the circumstances that have molded them into the people they are.

Pecola and her kind are defeated in The Bluest Eye, because they do not have any African-American narrative examples in their culture.[70] Morrison gives her characters the outlet to have their voices heard. The novel addresses the severity of the silencing of the helpless and oppressed, bringing their plight into general consciousness with its intimate storytelling. Claudia reminisces: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (5). Issues kept quiet become heard as the novel progresses, and the characters give the story richness as they respond to the narrative in sections that illuminate their individual development. The values lost in the story of the book are reinforced in the style it is written. The black

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[69] Mobley, 14.
[70] Mobley, 24.

storytelling style that includes reciprocal manner of narration illustrates the importance Morrison places on the preservation of distinctively black culture and heritage. The reader has to participate in the story and be changed by it. Morrison closes the distancing gap between the author and the audience by challenging the reader's cultural views and moral standing.[71] The intimate storytelling in Pecola's story thrives to affirm African-American experience.

4.2. Black Dialect

Morrison enforces her place within the authors of the black arts movement by including distinctively black spoken dialect in her narrative. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison displays the deep and complex nuances of black American spoken language. She places importance on the often-devalued dialects. By combining sections with colloquial conversations and standard writing, she brings variation and life to the text, making it more authentic and personal. Morrison thrives for her novels to be "both print and oral literature… to make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken". [72] She wants her characters to echo the black, oral traditions in their dialogue, and not deviate from realistic sounding language.

In conveying Pecola's story, Morrison utilizes language as a signifier of who belongs to the community and who is an outsider.[73] She separates the world of adults from the one of children by the way they communicate with each other. Claudia states: "Adults do not talk to us - they give us directions" (10). Still, even though the adults do not directly converse with the children, they transfer knowledge and perseverance of culture to them. This type of dialogue can be seen as signifying, a style prominent in African-American oral expression. Gates links the act of

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[71] Trudier Harris. Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison (Knoxville: The U of Tennessee P, 1991), 170-1.
[72] Mobley, 24.
[73] Conner, 19.

signifying back to the "black mythology's archetypical signifier, the Signifying Monkey". Signifying Monkey is a trickster who in the African-American folklore influences the relationship between the lion and the elephant. Gates discusses the Signifying Monkey as a primary mediator in the culture. He also includes the rhetorical acts of "marking, loud talking, testifying, calling out (of one's name), sounding, rapping, playing the dozens" into the realm of signifying acts.[74] Roger D. Abrahams further defines signifying as a "'technique of indirect argument or persuasion,' 'a language of implication,' 'to imply, goad, beg, boast, by indirect verbal or gestural means'".[75]

According to Yvonne Atkinson, signifying can also reaffirm communal identity and belonging, as it presents itself in Mrs. MacTeer's upset soliloquy when she notices that Pecola has drank three quarts of milk from the storage pantry.[76] "'Don't nobody need *three* quarts of milk. Henry Ford don't need three quarts of milk'", Mrs. MacTeer laments, 'That's just downright sinful. I'm willing to do what I can for folks. Can't nobody say I ain't. … Bible say watch as well as pray. Folks just dump their children off on you and go on 'bout their business'" (24-5). The children hear Mrs. MacTeer's speech, and even though it only seems like a tedious, unending complaint to them, it serves a larger purpose. Claudia and Frieda's mother aims to transfer to her children the virtue of moderation. Drinking an excess of milk is not necessary, especially in their frugal life situation. Mrs. MacTeer also signifies that she is working hard to provide for her children, and they should honor their parents' efforts. She further criticizes Pecola's parents for leaving her with the MacTeers, without any additional concern for her well-being. Mrs. MacTeer is a poor, hard-working woman with very little time to spend with her

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[74] Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the "Racial" Self. (New York: Oxford U P, 1987) 237.
[75] Gates, 1987, 239.
[76] Yvonne Atkinson. "Black English Oral Tradition in Works of Morrison", in Conner, 18. Atkinson also analyses Mrs. McTeer's signifying act in The Bluest Eye.

children. Via her soliloquies, she acts as an educator of cultural values both to her daughters, as well as the reader.

Pecola, on the other hand, is disabled from partaking in the signifying act of her community. She simply lacks an adult influence that would include her in the community. Her parents or the other adults she encounters do not transfer anything positive to her. Pauline's soliloquies teach Pecola nothing. When Pecola drops a pie at her mother's work place, Pauline strikes her down. Even her words towards her daughter are described as an assault. "'Crazy fool… my floor, mess… look what you… work… get on out… now that… crazy… my floor, my floor…my floor'" (109). Morrison catches Pauline's obvious rage over the situation; at the same time she demonstrates that Pauline has nothing constructive to offer her daughter. Pauline, as well as the other adults Pecola tries to associate with, do not speak to her directly. They rather ignore her or "talk over and around her, which, in the Black English oral tradition, signifies her 'otherness'".[77] Atkinson examines this otherness by analyzing how the three prostitutes speak in Pecola's presence. "'Oh, Lord. How that man loved me!'" Miss Marie exclaimed. "China arranged a fingerful of hair into a bang effect. 'Then why he left you to sell tail?' 'Girl, when I found out I could sell it - that somebody would pay cold cash for it, you could have knocked me over with a feather'. Poland began to laugh, soundlessly" (55). The prostitutes signify each other and verify their experiences by talking to each other. Pecola, on the other hand, is an outsider, a child in an adult world who is denied the access to development and knowledge. Her mother and father do not transfer their knowledge or culture to her; therefore she is bound to be a social failure.

In addition to utilizing African-American signifying acts in discourse, Morrison wants "to restore the language that Black people spoke to its original power".[78] She aims to preserve the

[77] Atkinson, in Conner, 17.
[78] Mobley, 92.

full nuances and the distinctive rhythm of black dialects. Her lively language is detected in the sharp rivalry among children in the playground "'You want a fat lip?' Bay Boy drew back his fist at me. 'Yeah, Gimme one of yours.' 'You gone get one'" (66). The confrontational tone and perseverance are imminent in the children's arguing. Morrison also uses colloquial expressions to make her narrative real and convincing. Pauline's memories of Cholly and her youth are another example of the author's use of black dialect: "So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together…. He used to whistle, and when I heerd him, shivers come to my skin" (115). In her writing, Morrison wants to record black experiences that have been denied a written presentation for centuries. She conserves the African-American vocabulary and natural flow of speech.

Morrison conducts her dialogues with care. "Dialogue done properly can be heard…. I have to rewrite, discard, and remove print-quality of language to put back the oral quality, where intonation, volume, gesture are all there. Furthermore, the characters have to speak their own language".[79] Her authentic way of writing a conversation is represented in the scene where the townswomen talk about MacTeers' new roomer, Mr. Henry.[80] "'Well, Henry ain't no chicken.' 'No, but he ain't no buzzard, either.' 'He ever been married to anybody'? … 'How come? Somebody cut it off?'" (14). Even more enchanting than the conversation itself, is Claudia's description of the quality and nuances of the exchange. "Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop" (15). Morrison portrays the enjoyment the blacks receive from using their distinctive style of conversation. She describes the conversation as an enjoyable reciprocal dance between the participants.

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[79] Tate, 126. Quotation from Tate's interview with Toni Morrison.
[80] Atkinson, in Conner, 14-5. Atkinson discusses the preciseness Morrison achieves in the analysis of the scene.

In the past, African-Americans relied heavily on the rhythms of language in their cultural expression. During slavery, they were not allowed to be educated and their artistic means of expression were very limited. Therefore the unique language that emerged among the blacks remains a powerful illustrator of the survival of the whole culture. Morrison wants to make her contribution to the preservation of distinctively black language and dialogue. She utilizes various structures of the African-American oral tradition, from illustrating signifying acts to creating a poignant argument at black children's playground. Her aim is to bring recognition to the spoken dialect of Black English that is affirming to the African-American cultural tradition.

4.3. Poetic Realism and Gothic Fable

Morrison moves her readers through the harsh African-American experiences by using a surprising combination of lyrical language and grotesque situations. Bell defines her writing as "poetic realism" and "gothic fable".[81] He clarifies how black poetic realists, such as Morrison and Jean Toomer, concentrate on the internal turmoil of their characters, rather than focusing on describing the structures of society. What makes Morrison's writing gothic for Bell is her style that presents a typically brief, lyrical narrative that concentrates on exploring the beauty of life through its tragedies and magic.[82] Her novel also includes the gothic element of "the shattering of the protagonists' image of his/her social/sexual roles", which is apparent in Pecola's defeat in the end.[83] Morrison's depiction of her character's personal experiences through the presentation of both the aesthetic and the disturbing aspects of life makes her all the more a genuine black artist. In slavery and well into the era after emancipation, the blacks were not allowed to influence the

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[81] Bell, 269.
[82] Bell, 270.
[83] Louis S. Gross, "Introduction", Redefining the American Gothic: from Wieland to Day of the Dead (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI, 1989) 1.

public life; therefore, it becomes immensely significant to portray their thoughts and reactions in their reality limited by white oppression. The gothic novel presents "the corruption produced by the dominant ideology as all-pervasive: every person and every place is infected by the poison of patriarchal, racist, or classist discourse".[84] In The Bluest Eye, Morrison explores this subject matter with a multidimensional style that sees both the poetry and the ugliness of life.

Poetic realism can be defined "as a form of prosodic disclosure that uses techniques of poetic construction to emphasize the multidimensionality of the perception of realistic dramatic works".[85] Using poetic imagery (language that aims to produce sensory images) as her device, Morrison narrates The Bluest Eye by concentrating on experiences black children have in their suffering community. She thrives for a lyrical and artistic representation of their reality. "Oh yes, the image, the pictures, for me – it's what holds it. I can't move along in a chapter or part unless I can see the single thing that makes it clear – almost like a painting".[86] For example, Morrison's poetic realism can be seen in her usage of assonance[87] (repeating vowel sounds) and imagery in her eloquent description of the boys who attack Pecola after school:

> They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned 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. (65)

Both Morrison's usage of assonance and imagery can be detected in her word choices, such as "cone of scorn" and "spilled over lips". Her description flows like a dance; it is vivid like a

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[84] Kari J. Winter, Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave Narratives, 1790-1865 (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1992) 53.
[85] Lawrence Buentello, "An Essay on Poetic Realism". In Search of the American Literary Masterpiece, 22 May 2005 <http://www.lawrencebuentello.com/id5.html>.
[86] Bessie W Jones. and Audrey L. Vinson, The World of Toni Morrison: Explorations in Literary Criticism (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1985) 135. An interview with Toni Morrison in 1981.
[87] Mary Oliver, A Poetry Handbook (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1994) 30, 92. Definitions of the terms assonance and imagery.

painting. Morrison captures the desperation and the survival tactics of the black children in the imagery of an erupting volcano. The children's anger is unstoppable and inevitable; it flows like lava and buries everything good in its path. Morrison concentrates on the boys' personal dilemmas, rather than explaining the communal structures that created them. Her narrative implies that consciousness molds reality – not vice versa.[88] Experiences and feelings are tangibly realistic in Morrison's writing; she does not allow the reader to ignore the African-American suffering any longer.

At the end of The Bluest Eye, Morrison draws a poetic conclusion about love. She does not describe communal love for humanity; she illustrates the love that has destroyed or debilitated the characters in the novel. In the following example, the author uses imagery and repetition as her poetic devices:

> Love is never better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love. The loved one is shorn, neutralized, frozen in the glare of the lover's inward eye (206).

The characters' psychological failure demonstrates itself in the way they care about each other. The passage unfolds like a tragic love sonnet that has endured the test of times, making it is extremely relevant to human experience. Morrison stresses the emotional world of her characters because their feelings and psychological processes are in many cases even more enduring than the structures of society. Time has passed since the emancipation and desegregation of blacks; still, their personal suffering and how it displays in their immediate world remain static.

The lyrical representation in Morrison's narratives is counterbalanced by her infatuation with the gothic and the tragic circumstances in life. Gothic literature is "fascinated by objects and

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[88] Bell, 269.

practices that are constructed as negative, irrational, immoral and fantastic".[89] Morrison admits her writing is often terrifying, yet she also sees "life affirming" qualities that present themselves through the text.[90] Her gothic fables seek the fascinating in the middle of sickness, violence and oppression. The Bluest Eye relishes on aestheticizing even the incestuous rape of Pecola; it pictures beauty as an inseparable part of traumatic events.[91] Cholly's thoughts at the time of his terrible act speak of tenderness: "The creamy toe of her bare foot scratching a velvet leg. It was such a small and simple gesture, but it filled him then with wondering softness. Not the usual lust to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness. A desire to cover her foot with his hand and gently nibble away the itch from the calf with his teeth" (162). Morrison makes the appalling act of rape seem beautiful, which increases its shocking effect. The author's gothic landscape in The Bluest Eye stretches from illustrating the beauty in the mind of an incestuous father to describing the fascinated thoughts of a sick child. Claudia narrates the grotesque of illness: "The puke swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet – green-gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same time"(11)? Claudia's young curiosity and perceptiveness pinpoint Morrison's usage of the gothic style. She wants to illuminate the beauty in the grotesque and the misplaced love in violence. By the multi-dimensional illustration of her character's private suffering, she expands their function in the novel; they begin to symbolize the timelessness of black experience.

Even Pecola, Morrison's most tragic character, becomes accessible in her despair. Morrison transfers her destruction into beauty; much in the same way she beautifies the circumstances of Cholly's criminal actions. "Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an

[89] Fred Botting, Gothic (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996) 3.
[90] Bellinelli, Morrison interview.
[91] Barbara Johnson, "'Aesthetic" and 'Rapport' in Morrison's Sula", in Conner, 10.

eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. 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" (204). The description of Pecola in her insanity and hopelessness is a significant example of how Morrison uses her poetic style in her gothic fables. Pecola is defeated; her mind and body have been violated to the point where she cannot find a way around insanity. She is ridiculed and abandoned by the whole community in the most inhumane manner. Morrison combines all the negative elements burdening Pecola and changes her into a wounded phoenix bird on the final pages of the novel. At the beginning, Pecola possesses all the potential to rise from the ashes of her poverty and racial inferiority. Her parents and the community tie her wings. The metaphorical and symbolic presentation of Pecola's condition enriches the novel and again expands the subject matter to address all the unrecognized suffering of the oppressed.

The relatively brief narrative of The Bluest Eye is continuously enriched by Morrison's poetic realism. She concentrates on describing her characters' thoughts by writing carefully crafted, lyrical prose. The poetic elements of her text are inseparable from the gothic tale her characters materialize in. The author purposefully places her characters in horrible situations to find out their strengths and weaknesses.[92] The novel, as its fullest, is an exploration to the minds of the oppressed; the people whose condition has remained unnoticed during the decades of racism and humiliation. Morrison wants to dive into the minds of the suffering blacks; she thrives to show the world the magnitude of destruction a limited, Eurocentric mindset can produce. Her narrative combines the horror and the beauty of life, making her subject matter more influential and accessible.

[92] Jones and Vinson, 141.

4.4. Nature

Morrison uses nature as a strong structural and stylistic element in The Bluest Eye. By her nature references, she affirms her connection to the African-American heritage and belief system. In African experience, "[t]he fundamental pulses of nature – the rains, the seasons, the tides – punctuated life. Thus each place had a sameness, a common imperative pulling all together to an insistent command that was above and beyond the individual self, family, or the clan".[93] Nature presents a never-ending cycle of seasons, connecting to the cyclical realization of time in black culture.[94] In Morrison's narrative, nature can be an enemy or a friend – like any other character in the novel.

"Naturalistic causality"[95] is strong in Morrison's writing. Heinze illuminates this concept in reference to The Bluest Eye by explaining how sitting in the cold and ignoring natural remedies causes Cholly's aunt Jimmy's death. Another example of a natural event preceding human experiences is Maureen Peal's arrival to Pecola's school. Claudia narrates: "It was a false spring day, which, like Maureen, had pierced the shell of a deadening winter. There were puddles, mud, and an inviting warmth that deluded us" (64). Maureen is a light-skinned and popular girl who on this particular day chooses to be nice to Pecola, Claudia and Frieda. The girls are tired of feeling inferior and they accept Maureen's offer to walk with them. The popular girl even buys Pecola some ice cream. Later in the scene, the girls begin to argue, and Maureen separates their worlds again by naming herself "cute" and the darker girls "ugly" (73). Like the false spring day, Maureen lures the other girls into believing that the world is changing and their differences could be overcome. Especially Pecola wants to desperately belong, after having been abused by the

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[93] Nathan Huggins, 1977, excerpt. "Cultural Ecopsychology: Issues of Displacement and the Urban African Community", 23 May 2005
< http://www.prescott.edu/users/jcanty/African%20Nature-based%20Traditions.htm>.
[94] Heinze, 122.
[95] Heinze, 161.

boys at the school. However, the feeling of reconciliation between the girls is fleeing and unrealistic, resembling the unlikely warm conditions in the middle of winter.

Morrison believes in the connection between nature and black identity.[96] As well as finding similarities between nature and human experience, she also often describes her characters' physical features by drawing similarities to the beauty and strength in nature. The physical description of Claudia's father pictures him as strong and relentless as the coldest winter. "My daddy's face is a study", Claudia narrates, "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 high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness" (61). The similarities between Mr. MacTeer and harsh winter correspond to his qualities as a person. He works persistently to provide for his family, even through the hardships of their poverty. He is dedicated to protect his family with his physical and emotional strength. Illustrating her character's physical qualities in connection to nature further underlines Morrison's abandonment of Eurocentric aesthetic standards. Mr. MacTeer's physical qualities refine themselves in Claudia's responsiveness to her father, rather than existing as an independent, institutionalized idea of beauty.[97]

In The Bluest Eye, seasons are used as an element of causality and structure. By dividing the novel's chapters according to the seasons, Morrison emphasizes the timelessness of her narrative and the cyclical nature African-American people used to attach to the events in the world. Eurocentric realization of time revolves around linear time concept where everything has a beginning and an end. Morrison presents a different idea: her narrative stays inconclusive, structured around chapters that echo nature and its cyclical endlessness.

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[96] Beaulieau, 12.
[97] Katherine Stern, "Toni Morrison's Beauty Formula", in Conner, 88.

The Bluest Eye begins in autumn when everything in nature begins to deteriorate in the anticipation of the cold winter. The reader is introduced to the Breedloves via Pauline and Cholly's violent fight in their storefront apartment. Later in the chapter, Pecola anticipates her future destiny by noticing weeds in the sidewalk: "The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty" (47). At the end of the novel, Pecola will clearly have become the weed that the community wants to pluck off of the lawn; she's an eye sore and her encounters will further convince her of the fact. In the autumn chapter, Pecola also menstruates for the first time, enabling her to be the ultimate victim of an incestuous rape.

Autumn is followed by the unforgiving winter. Pecola is further defeated by the encounters with Maureen Peal and her schoolmate's mother Geraldine, who calls her a "nasty little black bitch" (92). At the end of the section, Pecola's defeat is very imminent. "Outside, the March wind blew into the rip in her dress. She held her head down against the cold. But she could not hold it low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement" (93). Pecola is dying inevitably like the growth of nature in the winter.

The following spring, Pauline and Cholly's youth is revisited and Cholly impregnates Pecola. Soaphead Church thinks he offers Pecola a new beginning that is also traditionally symbolized by spring. Unfortunately, Soaphead and his shady motives drive Pecola over the edge to insanity. In nature, spring is the season of new growth. Pecola's situation imitates the fact in the most horrid and disturbingly reversed manner.

The novel ends in the summer when Claudia and Pecola's marigolds do not grow for some odd reason, and Pecola's insanity matures. "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers". Claudia narrates in retrospect: "Certain seeds 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" (206). The

summer chapter presents a total reversal of the natural order. During the traditional season of growth, everything, from Pecola's child to her sanity and the McTeer girls' marigold seeds, is destroyed and dies.

Morrison places great significance to natural events in her novels. In the past, nature was an intricate part of the African-American experience; especially the life of the poor was significantly influenced by changes in weather and seasons. The seasons determined the structure of life, and The Bluest Eye signifies the fact. The novel reminds the reader of the connection between the strengths of nature and the perseverance of society.[98] Morrison does not want the connection between people and nature to be overlooked and forgotten in the modern world; she thrives to enforce the ancient bond. She shows how much a part of nature humans really are. Morrison's communities imitate the cyclical nature of seasons: however harsh one season can be, an affirming realization of continuity will remain. Even though Pecola and her family are completely destroyed during the fruitless summer, Claudia remains to tell the story. She represents future and survival of the seemingly doomed community of Lorain, Ohio. Morrison suggests that Claudia's emotional strength and perseverance is connected to the bond she feels with the natural world. By inseparably integrating nature in her narrative, Morrison enforces the perseverance of the African-American experience.

[98] Barbara Christian, "Community and Nature: The Novels of Toni Morrison", in Barbara Christian, Black Feminist Criticism (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon P, 1985) 47.

5. Conclusion

In order to fully understand Morrison's text as black aesthetic literature, one has to realize the symbiotic relationship between her message and style. Her multi-layered narrative in The Bluest Eye brings the reader to epiphanies well beyond understanding the base story of the 12-year-old Pecola who escapes into insanity. The basis of the text is a fight to re-establish African-American culture's identity and ideological strength. bell hooks, an African-American professor and scholarly writer, narrates concerns similar to Morrison's. In her book Black Looks: Race and Representation, hooks claims: "It is the telling of our history that enables political self-recovery".[99] She further stresses that modern society has become so diversified and pluralistic it denies racism and inequality. The denial further encourages the minorities to let go of their heritage and assimilate to the melting pot of America. Both Morrison and hooks work against the false prediction that abandoning their cultural uniqueness guarantees the minorities' access to a better life and recognition. Morrison aims to educate blacks with her writing; she does not allow the African-American heritage to be forgotten. She does not avoid even the most difficult issues of race, whether it be personal suffering caused by the pressure of white culture or the decay of the whole community.

The perseverance of black culture is realized at the end of the The Bluest Eye when Claudia internalizes the beauty of her own heritage as she imagines Pecola's unborn child:

> I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly.
> It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth (190).

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[99] bell hooks, Black Looks: Race and Representation (Boston, MA: South End, 1992) 176.

Claudia's narrative brings together the essential ingredients that form Morrison's ideological aesthetic. It tells a story of a culture not appreciating its beauty and worth, a culture bombarded with plastic images of Eurocentric desirability. At the same time, the text presents familiar and lovable black images that have been carefully crafted within the lyrical presentation of the harsh story. Morrison promises beauty in suffering and hope in the deepest misery. Her message cannot be separated from her presentation since they form a seamless, unbreakable circle with no beginning nor end.

I began my thesis with an attempt to illustrate the aspects that qualify Morrison's novel as black arts literature. Right from the beginning, my aim was to illustrate the mutually enforcing style and subject matter of her work. The concepts of the black empowerment movements provided a fruitful background for a thorough analysis of her text. I aimed to present a systematic study of the various ways Morrison fights for the survival of the African-American culture in her narrative. At the end, the results of such a study offer a multidimensional world, presenting a view reaching way beyond the base story of the novel.

Ideologically, the black aesthetic movement offered the most informative starting point that tied all the different threads of my study together. Since the ideology brings forth a natural bridge between arts and politics, my choice for including an extensive section about the political ideologies began to feel even more essential to the analysis. Whatever direction I took my study, no matter whether in the realm of Morrison's political message or her style, the increasing understanding of the continuous and systematic synthesis of the two elements provided the core to my findings.

Since Morrison's first novel is not only very politically inclined, but also immensely personal, I found it fundamental to provide multiple quotations by the author herself. Fortunately, several interviews and speeches by Morrison have been published, and these added resources bring

further balance to the analysis of her work. The Bluest Eye derives from a real experience in the past; therefore I also wanted to further explore what the author had to say personally about the political structures and stylistic choices beyond the basic story of her novel.

Even though this thesis concentrates on only one of Morrison's nine novels, similar glimpses of ideological concerns and stylistic choices can be detected throughout the author's whole literary output. Heinze states that each of her works "in progression is an increasingly bold and original revoicing of previous concerns".[100] For example Sula, Morrison's second novel, continues to voice the author's concerns for women's position in the society and dynamics in African-American community. She also continuously revisits the problems and changes Eurocentric culture brings to the realities of black people. The timeline of her novels varies from the 1800's to the present day. However, her consistent variation on similar subject matter and style remind one of the cyclical realizations of time in black culture. No matter how diverse and modernized the current society, Morrison reminds her readers of the undeniable fact that a meaningful future can only be build on the foundation of past experiences and cultural heritage.

The Bluest Eye marks the beginning of Morrison's journey to black empowerment. It is the beginning of a multi-dimensional and holistic portrayal of the African-American experience, past and present. In the course of the thesis, various political concerns and writing techniques were discussed in separate analysis. Remarkably, the seemingly different topics continuously blend into one; much in the similar manner Morrison's characters in the novel are an inseparable part of the larger communal and societal fabric. The author's attempt to produce text that is simultaneously thought provoking, socially meaningful and yet, undeniably beautiful, is realized in The Bluest Eye. Thomas March illuminates Morrison's central point in the novel, stating: "The

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[100] Heinze, 12. Kubitschek, 27. Kubitschek also recognizes that The Bluest Eye established Morrison's characteristic subject matter and technique.

world of Morrison's fiction is one that seeks to fill in the emotional and human history of African America in its own right – neither whitewashed nor separate, but a narrative that restores to the concept of 'African-American' the full range of human experience".[101] This continuous attempt that presents itself on multiple levels in The Bluest Eye, qualifies Morrison's novel as black arts literature.

To analyze Morrison's style without bringing attention to her message, or vice versa, would have only produced a flat and one-sided study, as Conner rightfully claims.[102] Therefore, when both the subjects are brought together in the same study, one has a clearer understanding of the author's attempt to write prose that is "indisputably black".[103] Beauty, horror, politics and cultural values form an inseparable whole in The Bluest Eye, forming an intriguing synthesis of black aesthetic ideology.

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[101] March, in Bloom, 2002, 40.
[102] Conner, "Introduction", x.
[103] Morrison, 1970, "Afterword", 211.

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