

## Lady No Longer Sings the Blues: Rape, Madness, and Silence in *The Bluest Eye*

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By Jessie Carney Smith

Robert Stepto begins a recent interview with Toni Morrison by commenting on the "extraordinary sense of place" in her novels. He notes that she creates specific geographical landscapes with street addresses, dates, and other such details. His observations certainly hold true for Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, set in a black neighborhood in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941. Reading *The Bluest Eye*, I feel as if I have been in the abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain where Pecola Breedlove lives, as if I have been over the territory traversed by the eleven-year-old black girl as she skips among tin cans, tires, and weeds.

Morrison's skill in creating this very specific place accounts, in part, for my sense of the strangely familiar, the uncanny, when I read her novel—but only in part. While reading, I am familiar not only with Pecola's neighborhood but also, in a more generalized way, with Pecola's story. The sequence of events in this story—a sequence of rape, madness, and silence—repeats a sequence I have read before. Originally manifest in mythic accounts of Philomela and Persephone, this sequence provides Morrison with an ancient archetype from which to structure her very contemporary account of a young black woman. In the pages which follow I want to explore intersections between these age-old myths and Morrison's ageless novel.

For an account of Philomela, we must turn to Ovid, who includes her story in his *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.). According to the chronicler, this story begins with an act of separation: Procne leaves her much-loved sister, Philomela, to join her husband, Tereus, in Thrace. After several years, Procne convinces Tereus to make a trip to Athens and escort Philomela to Thrace for a visit. In Athens, Tereus barely manages to curb the lust he feels for Philomela. He caresses her with his eyes, watches possessively as she kisses her father good-bye, and uses each embrace, each kiss, "... to spur his rage, and feed his fire; He wished himself her father—and yet no less Would lust look hideous in a father's dress."

Arriving in Thrace, Tereus drags Philomela into a dark wood and rapes her. The virgin calls out the names of father, sister, gods, but to no avail. Having indulged his lust, Tereus prepares to leave this "ringdove ... with blood-stained plumes still fluttering" when she dares cry out against his sin: "I'll speak your deed, and cast all shame away....My

voice shall reach the highest tract of air, And gods shall hear, if gods indeed are there." Tereus cannot tolerate such sacrilege against his name, so he perpetrates yet another rape:

with pincers he... gripped the tongue that cried his shame,  
that stammered to the end her father's name,  
That struggled still, and strangled utterance made,  
And cut it from the root with barbarous blade.

Deprived of speech and lodged in "walls of stone," Philomela weaves the tale of her plight into a piece of fabric, which she then sends to Procne. When Procne learns of her sister's grief and her husband's treachery, she determines upon a most hideous revenge; she slays the son she has had with Tereus and feeds his remains to the unsuspecting father. While Ovid's story ends with this feast, popular mythology adds yet another chapter, transforming Philomela into a nightingale, damned forever to chirp the name of her rapist: *terue, tereu*.

Obviously, male-violating-female functions as the core action within Philomela's story. Under different guises, this violation occurs several times: first, when Tereus ruptures the hymen of Philomela; second, when Tereus ruptures the connecting tissue of Philomela's tongue, and, finally, when he enters her body yet again ("Thereafter, if the frightening tale be true,/On her maimed form he wreaked his lust anew"). With each act Tereus asserts his presence, his sensual realm, and denies the very existence of such a realm (encompassing not only sensuality, but the senses themselves) to Philomela. As if to reinforce the violation, Tereus, following his act of rape, encloses Philomela in silence, in stone walls. He thereby forces her to assume externally imposed configurations instead of maintaining those natural to her.

If man-*raping*-woman functions as the most basic "mythemic act" in Philomela's story, the most basic mythemic *inter*-act involves not only this pair, but another: father and sister of the rape victim. When, for example, Ovid notes that Tereus, lusting for Philomela, "wished himself her father," and when the chronicler describes Philomela, in the midst of the rape, calling out her father's name (for help, of course, but for what else?) he sets the act of violence within a familial matrix. Thus, we cannot limit consideration of this act's motivations and ramifications to two individuals. Interestingly enough, however, just as the basic mythemic act (man *raping* woman) robs the woman of identity, so too the mythemic *inter*act; dependent upon the familial roles for personal verification ("mother of," "sister of," "wife of") the female must fear a loss of identity as the family loses its boundaries—or, more accurately, as the male transgresses these boundaries.

Having noted the most important structural elements in Philomela's story, we cross an ocean, several centuries and countless historical, racial, and class lines before coming to the story of Pecola. Despite obvious contextual

differences between the two stories, structural similarities abound. Individual mythemes from Philomela's story appear, without distortion, in that of Pecola. First, in various ways and at various costs, the female figure suffers violation: by Mr. Yacobowski, Junior, Bay Boy and friends, Cholly, Soaphead. Second, with this violation a man asserts his presence as "master," "man-in-control," or "god" at the expense of a young woman who exists only as someone to "impress upon." Third, following the violation/assertion, this woman suffers an enclosure or undesirable transformation; she cowers, shrinks, or resides behind walls of madness. Finally, the most characteristic example of violation/assertion/destruction occurs within the family matrix; Cholly Breedlove rapes his own daughter, violating a standard code of familial relations. We now might look more closely at individual instances of mythemes structuring the Pecola story.

An early, and paradigmatic, example of male transgression and subsequent female silence occurs in the "See the Cat" section. Junior, a tyrannical, unloving black boy, invites a rather credulous Pecola into his house, ostensibly to show her some kittens; like Philomela, Pecola has no idea of the dangers involved in trusting herself to a male guide. Once inside, engrossed in admiration of the furnishings, she forgets about Junior until he insists that she acknowledge him:

She was deep in admiration of the flowers when Junior said, "Here!" Pecola turned. "Here is your kitten!" he screeched. And he threw a big black cat right in her face.

Pecola immediately responds to this unexpected penetration by sucking in her breath; metaphorically she draws herself inward. She then attempts to flee, but just as Tereus confines Philomela behind stone walls, Junior confines Pecola behind the wall of his will. Junior leaped in front of her. "You can't get out. You're my prisoner," he said. His eyes were merry nut hard.... He pushed her down, ran out the door that separated the rooms, and held it shut with his hands. Male realms expand as those of the female suffer an almost fatal contraction.

Junior does not actually rape Pecola. Morrison, however, duplicates the dynamics of the scene between Junior and Pecola in a scene between Cholly and Pecola, where rape *does* occur. Eleven-year-old Pecola stands at the sink, scraping away at dirty dishes, when her father, drunk, staggers into the kitchen. Unlike Tereus and Junior, Cholly does not carry his victim into foreign territories; rather, Pecola's rape occurs within her own house, and this fact increases its raw horror (Morrison denies us the cover of metaphor and confronts us directly with a father's violation of his daughter). As Morrison explains, several factors motivate Cholly, but the two thoughts floating through his besotted brain immediately prior to his penetration of Pecola point, once more, to his desire for confirmation of his presence. First, a gesture of Pecola's, a scratching of the leg, reminds him of a similar gesture of Pauline's—or, more accurately, reminds him of *his own* response to this gesture. He repeats his response, catching Pecola's foot in his hand, nibbling in the flesh of her leg, just as he had done with Pauline, so many years before. Of

consequence here is not Pecola's gesture, but Cholly's belief that he can regain an earlier perception of himself as young, carefree and whimsical by using this girl/woman as medium. When Pecola, however, unlike the laughing Pauline, remains stiff and silent, Cholly shifts to a second train of thought, a second stimulus to self-assertion: "The rigidness of her shocked body, the silence of her stunned throat, was better than Pauline's easy laughter had been. The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him, and a bolt ran down his genitals, giving it length." Thus, on a literal level, Cholly expands as Pecola contracts:

The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear. His soul seemed to slip down to his guts and fly out into her, and the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked by the only sound she made—a hollow suck of air in the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon.

As in the episode with Junior, Pecola sucks inward, but without positive effect; like a deflating circus balloon, she *loses* the benefits of lifegiving oxygen and the power of speech.

To enforce this silence, Cholly need not cut off Pecola's tongue or imprison her behind stone walls. The deprecating of Pecola Breedlove takes a different form from that of Philomela. Upon regaining consciousness following the rape, Pecola *is* able to speak; she tells Mrs. Breedlove what has happened. But as Mrs. Breedlove does not want to hear and does not want to believe, Pecola must recognize the futility of attempted communication. Thus when Cholly, like Tereus, rapes a second time, Pecola keeps the story to herself; in silence this eleven-year-old girl steps across commonly accepted borders of reason and speech to enter her own personal world of silence and madness. Pecola's "self" becomes so crazed, so fragmented, that it conducts conversations with itself—and with no one else...

Of course, when Pecola comments that her mirror image does not engage other people in conversation, she engages in self-commentary; "I" and "you" are one and the same. Tragically, even when combined, this "I" and "you" do not compose one whole being. Claudia's description of the mutilated Pecola leaves no doubt that she no longer exists as a reasonable human being; like Philomela-turned nightingale, the "little-girl-gone-to- woman" undergoes a transformation: The damage done was total.... Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an 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. Silent, isolated, insane: Pecola cannot escape.

In depicting the effects of rape on one young woman, Morrison sets into motion a series of associations that take their cue from gender. Men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. Women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence, and madness. An understanding of the powerful dynamics

behind this allotment of presence/absence, language/silence, reason/madness along sexual lines contributes to an understanding of the painful truths contained in Philomela's story, in Pecola's story, and in the story of yet another rape victim: Persephone. While clearly related to the Philomela myth, that of Persephone differs in certain details which, when brought to *The Bluest Eye*, prompt an even richer reading of the novel. Before engaging in an application of Persephone's story to that of Pecola....

When Pluto, god of the underworld, abducts the "trim-ankled" young woman (and surely it is not mere coincidence that Morrison specifies Pecola's ankles as a stimulant to Cholly's desire) this mood changes abruptly; in terror, the virgin shrieks for her father, Zeus. While noting that Persephone directs her shrieks to her father, Homer also comments on the virgin's hopes relative to her mother:

Still *glimpsing* the earth,  
the brilliant sky,  
the billowing, fish-filled sea and the rays of the sun,  
Persephone vainly hoped to see her mother again.

Homer establishes a causal connection between rape and the loss of a particular *vision*. He further substantiates this connection in Demeter's response to her daughter's rape, a punitive response which involves Demeter's changing the world so that its occupants will no longer see fruits and flowers:

She made that year  
most shocking and frightening  
for mortals who lived on the nourishing earth.  
The soil did not yield a single seed.  
Demeter kept them all underground.

The goddess imposes a sensual deprivation on mortals parallel to the sensual deprivation suffered by her daughter (note that *The Bluest Eye* opens with a statement of similar deprivation: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941"). By the end of the hymn, Demeter and Pluto reach a compromise; half of the year Persephone resides with her mother and the flowers grow; during the other half, Persephone remains with Pluto and the earth produces no fruits.

In a very recent reworking of the Persephone story, Philips Chesler focuses most intently on the fate of this myth's female characters. Because she places women's experiences at the center of her version, Chesler begins with a chapter of the story which does not appear in Homer and Frazer: Persephone menstruates. Further, Chesler

specifies the nature of certain acts and relationships that her male counterparts choose to obscure; she identifies rape as rape, fathers as fathers:

One morning Persephone menstruated. That afternoon, Demeter's daughters gathered flowers to celebrated the loveliness of the event. A chariot thundered, then clattered into their midst. It was Hades, the middle aged god of death, come to *rape* Persephone, come to carry her off to be his queen, to sit beside him in the realm of *non-being* below the earth, come to commit the first act of violence earth's children had ever known. Afterwards the three sisters agreed that he was old enough to be Persephone's *father*. Perhaps he was; who else could he be? There were no known male parents ... and thus they discovered that in shame and sorrow childhood ends, and that nothing remains the same.

Morrison, like Chesler, pays attention to female rites of passage; she includes a description of Pecola's first menstruation, an experience which bonds Pecola to her adopted sisters, Claudia and Frieda. Also like Chesler, Morrison insists on the paternal identity of the rapist (Pecola need not shriek the name of her father as Philomela and Persephone do; father is right there) and emphasizes that the rape act brings one entire way of life to a close ("nothing remains the same"). This rapport between Chesler's Persephone and Morrison's Pecola surfaces in conclusions to the stories as well. Chesler writes:

Persephone still had to visit her husband once each year (in winter, when no crops could grow), but her union with him remained a barren one. Persephone was childless. Neither husband nor child—no stranger would ever claim her as his own.

Pecola's fate runs along strikingly parallel lines. Despite the offerings and incantations of Claudia and Frieda, Pecola miscarries and remains childless. Grown people turn away, children laugh, and no stranger attempts to share Pecola's world.

Structurally, the stories of Philomela, Persephone, and Pecola share the same blueprint: violated by a male relative, a young virgin suffers sensual loss of such an extreme that her very identity is called into question. In one brutally explicit scene Ovid conveys the terror of Philomela's sensual loss— Tereus severs his sister-in-law's tongue and deprives her of speech. As chroniclers of this same basic female experience, Homer, Frazer, and Chesler also must convey the terror of sensual loss. In their versions, however, sight rather than speech assumes priority, and they convey the terror of deprivation not in one explicit scene, but by depicting the ramifications of an altered vision. Of course, this particular emphasis encourages yet further consideration of the Persephone myth and Morrison's novel, the very title of which suggests an interest in the way vision structures our world. This interest, reflected in the novel's title, (what does it mean to see through "the bluest eye"?) and in sectional titles (how does

one "see mother," "see father"?) springs naturally from Morrison's more fundamental interests: how does the world see a young black girl? how does a young black girl see a world? and finally, what are the correspondences between presence/absence, vision/nonvision, male/female?

As described by various psychologists and psychoanalysts, the processes of identity construction and personal integration involve an extremely sensitive and constantly shifting balance between seeing and being seen—so that, for example, only after an infant sees itself reflected in the mother's eyes (that is, given a presence) can the infant, through its own eyes, bestow a presence on others. Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison provides several examples of the ways sex and race may prompt a dangerous distortion of this visual balance. An early instance of this distortion, and subsequent personal disintegration, occurs during an exchange between Pecola and Mr. Yacobowski, white male proprietor of a candy store on Garden Avenue. Pecola enjoys her walk to Mr. Yacobowski's store. Many times she has seen that crack in the walk, this clump of dandelions. Having seen them, she grants them a reality, a reality which redounds to include Pecola herself:

These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them.... She owned the crack ... she owned the clump of dandelions.... And owning them made her part of the world, and the world part of her.

Such a happy rapport between viewer and vision is short-lived, however. When Pecola enters the candy store and comes under Mr. Yacobowski's eyes, her existence, as well as the existence of her world, become matters of doubt. Mr. Yacobowski *does not see* her:

Somewhere between the retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is *nothing to see*.

In effect, this scene parallels previously described rape scenes in the novel: male denies presence to female. Pecola cannot defend herself against this denial: "she looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness." Nor can she defend her world; walking home, she rejects the dandelions she formerly has favored. They, like Pecola herself, certainly will not satisfy standards that the blue eyes of a Mr. Yacobowski may impose: "Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and so not send love back. She thinks "They are ugly. They are weeds." Before contact with this white male, Pecola creates belief in both a world and a self; following contact with Yacobowski, her conjuring powers impaired, she abandons the effort.

A second example of visual distortion finds Pecola face to face with Geraldine, one of those "brown girls from Mobile and Aiken" able to construct inviolable worlds by imposing strict boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable, the seen and the unseen. Unlike Mr. Yacobowski, Geraldine does *look* at Pecola, but, like Yacobowski, Geraldine does not *see* Pecola; she sees only a series of signs, a symbolic configuration. Thus, when Geraldine returns home and discovers a shrieking son, a frying feline on the radiator, and an unfamiliar black girl in her living room, she responds by distancing herself from Pecola. With no qualms whatsoever she relegates the young girl to the general category of "black female who is an embarrassment to us all", or, "black female whom we would prefer to keep out of sight":

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out of her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy wad of gum peeking out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down to the heel of the shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up.... She had seen this little girl all of her life.

Pecola, for Geraldine, serves as symbol of everything ugly, dirty, and degrading. Physically as well as symbolically, Geraldine must negate Pecola, must deny the ragged eleven-year-old access to her world. The woman who does not sweat in her armpits or thighs, who smells of wood and vanilla says to Pecola, *quietly* says to Pecola: "Get out.... You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house!" In other words, get out of my world, out of the vision I construct before and about me. ...

Pecola leaves. As she leaves, she hangs her head, lowers her eyes; incapable of defending herself against visual distortion, Pecola attempts to deny vision altogether. But, even here, she fails: "she could not hold it [her head] low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement." These snowflakes, falling and dying, suggest the visual perimeters of Pecola's world. In an earlier comment, Morrison generalizes as to the nature of these perimeters: "She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people." As these eyes do not see her, or see her only as a sign of something other, Pecola loses sight of herself.

Although Pecola's encounters with Mr. Yacobowski and Geraldine serve as the most complete and sensitively drawn, examples of visual imbalance begun much earlier in Pecola's life—for that matter, begun even before Pecola sees the light of day, while she is in Pauline's womb. During the nine months of pregnancy, Pauline spends most afternoons at the movies, picking up an education in white values of beauty and ugliness. Morrison describes this education as yet another violation of male on female, white on black. There, in a darkened theater, images come together, "all projected through the ray of light from above and behind." This ray of light resembles a gigantic eyeball (apologies to Emerson) which defines the boundaries of existence and which, of necessity, projects a white male vision. Having absorbed these silver-screen values, Pauline conjures up "a mind's eye view" of her



soon-to-be-born child more in keeping with a white fantasy than black reality. Upon birth, Pecola gives lie to this view, and Pauline expresses her disappointment: "So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she don't look the same.... Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly."

As various psychologists attest, the mother's gaze is of primary importance in generating a child's sense of self. Tragically, Pauline looks at her infant daughter and then looks away. Morrison's novel contains repeated instances of Pecola's negation as other characters refuse to see her. *The Bluest Eye* also provides numerous instances of Pecola's desire to hide her own eyes, thereby refusing to acknowledge certain aspects of her world. Morrison articulates this desire for self-abnegation most explicitly in a postscript to her description of a typical fight between family members in the Breedlove home. Mrs. Breedlove hits Cholly with a dishpan, Cholly returns the blow with his fists, Sammy strikes at Cholly, while shouting "you naked fuck," and Pecola covers her head with a quilt. The quilt of course cannot completely block out this scene, so Pecola prays that God will make her disappear. Receiving no response from the man in the sky, she does her best on her own:

She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left.

Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them.

These paragraphs forcefully convey Pecola's desire and her notion of how she might realize it. If Pecola were to see things differently, she might *be seen* differently; if her eyes were different, her world might be different too. As Morrison deals out one ugly jigsaw piece after another, as she fits the pieces together to construct Pecola's world, we come to understand the impulse behind Pecola's desire, as well as its ultimate futility. When the boys shout at her, "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked," Pecola drops her head and covers her eyes; when Maureen accuses her of having seen her father naked, Pecola maintains her innocence by disclaiming, "I wouldn't even look at him, even if I did see him;" when Maureen attacks her yet again Pecola tucks her head in "a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover the ears." By covering ears, eyes, and nose Pecola attempts to shut out the testimony of her senses. Reminded of her own ugliness or that of her world, she repeatedly resorts to an elemental self-denial.