

## The Nature of Whiteness

Taken from *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*

By Harold Bloom

As we intimated at the outset, exploring the nature of whiteness in order to expose the negative consequences of the embourgeoisement of black culture gives *The Bluest Eye* a special slant. On one level, Geraldine, who has taken advantage of what little opportunity exists for black women from her background, is an example of a middle-class black woman who has become divorced from her African-American roots:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul.

On another level, her history suggests that African-American women in her position surrender a deep-rooted passion which whites both envy and fear: 'The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions'. The word 'dreadful' here does not convey the views of the black kinswoman narrator but of the land-grant colleges which inculcate black students in white values.

In placing 'funk' at the centre of the African-American sensibility Morrison's text risks confirming a white stereotype of black women. But Geraldine's loss of passion is an indicator of the erosion of her black identity. Her physical being within the cultural frame she has adopted is described in terms of absences. The closest she comes to experiencing an orgasm is when her napkin slips free of her sanitary belt. In Geraldine's life the family kitten of the Dick-Jane mythology also becomes the object of displaced emotions. The cat, which she cradles in 'the deeply private areas of her lap', is the only thing to which she can show any kind of warmth. Geraldine's marriage is described as building a nest; it seems to consist only of ironed shirts and the phrase 'birthed Louis Junior' suggests that parenthood, too, for her is a cold affair. Even the black cat which with blue eyes seems to signify the ideology to which Geraldine aspires, is as cold as an iceberg. The colours of Geraldine's home, of which we become aware when Junior invites Pecola in to torment her, are those of the primer; there is a red-and-gold *Bible* and lamps with green-and-gold bases. The word 'pretty' is strategically repeated throughout and the boy himself wears a white shirt and blue trousers.

Pecola disturbs Geraldine because she represents disorder: 'Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt', while the impact of white standardised concepts of beauty upon young women like

Pecola is epitomised in the way in which the blue-eyed black cat when thrown at Pecola claws at her face.

Geraldine's final words to Pecola pointedly recall Maureen's to Frieda and Claudia: "Get out ... You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."

Instead of passing on ancestral wisdom, the traditional function of the African mother, a role assumed by Pilate in the later novel *Song of Solomon*, Geraldine passes on divisiveness. Ironically, her son, Junior, would like to be accepted by the black boys; he would like to roll in the dirt with them and share their wildness, in effect overthrowing the control and order of the primer. Unable to do so, he takes his frustration out on brown-skinned girls as black men displace the humiliation which they suffer at the hands of whites on their wives and children. Significantly he is also afraid of black girls who are said to hunt in packs. The animal metaphor, suggesting how he sees them not how the narrator perceives them, is an index of the extent to which Junior has assumed the derogatory white view of blacks as animals rather than people. The metaphor also suggests that there is defence in solidarity and highlights the vulnerability of those who try to go it alone. The image of the dead cat with its blue eyes closed, 'leaving only an empty, black, and helpless face', suggest the cultural vacuum in which blacks who aspire to white norms may eventually find themselves.

The counterpoints to Geraldine in the novel are the three prostitutes: China, Poland, and Miss Marie. Not only do they have a sexual autonomy which Geraldine has surrendered but they have economic independence. As such, they are also a counterpoint to other petty bourgeois African-Americans who benefit from the exploitations of their own people: the Peal family makes money out of racial law suits while the Whitcombs exploit Africans who live in the West Indies.

The novel focuses not only on the interracial prejudices caused by the black petty bourgeoisie but also on the obsessive nature of their fixation with white values and the lengths to which they sometimes go to deny their blackness. The Whitcombs are so obsessed with not being black, grateful to the decaying British nobleman who gave them their whiteness, that they continue to intermarry to maintain it. Louis Junior's hair is deliberately cut short to hide its wooliness whilst his skin is lotioned to disguise its ashy Africanness. The most ironic example of all, however, is Maureen, the counterpoint to Pecola's humiliation and victimisation. Maureen looks and dresses like Jane, the archetypal Euro-American girl. Whilst Pecola is ignored by her teachers, Maureen is encouraged. Ironically, the lynch rope into which Maureen's hair is said to have been braided reminds us of slavery and oppression, the past on which black solidarity ought to be transformed into an adornment and robbed of its power. This kind of inversion is crucial to her rejection of the concept of 'sisterhood'. Once again, the point is made that cultural dislocation, as for Geraldine, brings about an emotional and sexual dislocation. The implication that her white employee has married a man with 'a slash in his face instead of a mouth', is that she has never

experienced the passion which Pauline used to find with Cholly, encapsulated in the description of orgasm from a woman's point of view:

I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me—deep into me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling alone my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors, and I'm afraid I'll come and I'm afraid I won't. But I know I will. And I do. And it be all rainbow all inside. And it lasts and lasts and lasts ...

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The order of the white world, its coherence and moral certainty, is juxtaposed throughout with the disunity and search for coherence in the lives of African-Americans. The chapter which contrasts the white, mythical mother of the primer with Pauline is followed by a chapter that takes up the description of the father as big, strong and protective in the primer extract. This is itself ironic in the light of the text's subsequent celebration of the inner strength and fortitude not of black fathers but of black women:

Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and recreated it in their own image... They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence—and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men.

The chapter, in contrasting Cholly with the strong, protective father of the primer, begins by fleshing out his past and concludes with his rape of his own daughter, an incident which can only be understood, if not excused, in light of this background. Compounding the irony, the primer extract begins by crucial to her rejection of the concept of 'sisterhood'. Once again, the point is made that cultural dislocation, as for Geraldine, brings about an emotional and sexual dislocation. The implication that her white employee has married a man with 'a slash in his face instead of a mouth', is that she has never experienced the passion which Pauline used to find with Cholly, encapsulated in the description of orgasm from a woman's point of view:

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the white father if he will 'play' with his daughter, Jane, a verb which in the Breedlove episode acquires a much less innocent connotation. There is a further irony in the way in which Claudia's recollections are of Frieda relating how her father beat up Mr. Henry because he touched her breasts and of being dragged to the doctor by her mother in case she had been 'ruined'. Within this account, Cholly is remembered not for being a strong, protective father but for being always drunk. As Hernton observes, it is concomitant with the black literary heritage that black women write about the violence and abuse which they have suffered at the hands of black men. This has created problems, however, for black women writers. When they document the violence and rape they have suffered, even as young girls, they are sometimes accused of sowing the seeds of division in what should be perceived of as a homogeneous community in the face of white oppression. As Hernton says, 'one of the most galvanizing examples of this is the hostility black men have toward Toni Morrison'. This makes it all the more important to understand the complexity of what Morrison is trying to do.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the white father of the primer is invoked as a contrast not only to Cholly but also to Cholly's own father who abandoned him to his mother. The way in which the text returns to Cholly's past to contextualise what has happened is a device used in several of Morrison's novels to illustrate and explore how what appears to be immoral behaviour is actually the result of unnatural experiences imposed on black people by whites. The opening sentence of this chapter sharply contrasts Cholly's childhood with the way in which Pauline's white charges have been brought up; he was left on a junk heap wrapped in two blankets and an old newspaper. This rejection is compounded by some of his later experiences. His grandmother takes him to her bed for warmth in winter, an act which the reference to the way in which he could see her wrinkled, sagging breasts suggests is unnatural, and it is with her that he witnesses violence for the first time when she takes a razor strap to his mother. Here the novel is not only concerned with the way in which Cholly's relationship with his father has been obliterated, but with the way in which white racism and colonialism fractured relationships between mother and child, an increasing and recurring theme in Morrison's work as we shall see in discussions of her subsequent novels. At the beginning of her final narrated section, the adult Claudia recalls her mother as she was in 1929, so that her newfound appreciation of her black identity and of how Pecola's tragedy involved them all is concomitant with a renewal of her bond with her female ancestral line. After she has been raped by her father, Pecola lies on the kitchen floor trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her. The connection is complex, but it is one that the reader as much as Pecola has to make through the way in which Pauline denied her daughter the mother/daughter bonding which in Morrison's novels, as we shall see in the discussion of *Beloved*, is crucial to black women's self-definition.

Cholly's rape of his daughter is as much rooted in the past as in the present. His young daughter's helpless presence arouses a range of emotions within him, culminating before the rape in a hatred reminiscent of that which years earlier he had transferred to Darlene when the white hunters forced him to 'perform' sexually with

her in front of them. Pecola's innocent gesture of scratching the back of her leg with her foot reminds him of the first occasion he was aroused by Pauline. The whole episode is shot through with confusion: between memories of Pauline and the excitement of what is forbidden; between the past with Darlene and the present with Pecola; between desire for Pecola and tenderness for her. When Cholly approaches his daughter he does so crawling on all fours like a child of the animal which whites have made him feel. Nibbling the back of her leg he regresses into the most primal of experiences, while his closed eyes suggest how he is unable to see the full moral implications of what he is doing. Right up until the act of penetration, though, he retains some semblance of moral being, albeit confused, wanting to 'fuck her—tenderly'. When he enters and impregnates her, the text makes clear that all moral responsibility and familial dignity have been abandoned: 'His soul seemed to slip down to his guts ...' After he has finished, he stands at the end of the chapter as a pathetic figure made limp as the sight of Pecola's 'grayish panties' emphasises, as much by the realisation of what he has done as by his ejaculation. Yet he is also a tragic figure broken, as the final references to his hatred make clear, by what white society has done to him and this is reinforced by the way the account of his rape of Pecola brings the incident with Darlene in the woods to mind. When he and Darlene began to make love together, she tickled his ribs and grabbed his ribcage while he dug his fingers into the neck of her dress; his assault on Pecola begins in earnest when he digs his fingers into her waist. The description of how his soul had fallen down to his guts recalls how the flashlight of the white hunters, forcing him to penetrate Darlene, 'wormed its way into his guts' while 'the gigantic thrust' he makes into his daughter reminds us of how with Darlene 'he almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully ...'

The women who gossip about the rape perpetrate the contempt which led to it. The novel comes full circle from its initial questioning of the mode of perception that labels some plants flowers and others weeds. Claudia conjures up an image of Pecola's child that is not ugly, as the gossips suggest, but a counterpoint to the white doll of the beginning and to Pauline's pink-white charges: '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'. Claudia's memory of Pecola's victimization by so many people anticipates the ironic juxtaposition of the primer excerpt which introduces Pecola's schizophrenia and which focuses on the friend who will play with Jane. Of course the effect of this is to underscore Pecola's loneliness and lack of friends.

*The Bluest Eye* is an innovative novel in which its experiments with form are determined by the perspectives and approaches which it brings to the condition of the African-American at the tense interface between two cultures. One of these perspectives is the way in which language is enmeshed with power structures, pursued throughout the novel by the persistent contrasting of the Dick-Jane mythology of the primer with the Breedlove family. Within this ironic interplay of difference, the text brings a particular perspective not only to the impact of white ideologies on the black community, but also to the nature of whiteness and its inappropriateness to determine the contours of African-American culture and lived experience.