

# Silencing Conflicts: From Oppression to Self-Censorship in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

## Des conflits réduits au silence : de l'oppression à l'auto-censure dans *The Bluest Eye* de Toni Morrison

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at showing how the black community portrayed in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is forced into silence by the oppressive, white-dominated American society of the 1940s. The omnipresence of the so-called white superiority in the black characters' everyday lives is so pervasive that Blacks are denied the right and ability to forge their own societal standards. As a result, white-established social norms are internalized by Blacks, who are not given the chance to express themselves. This imposed silence disrupts the black community, which becomes perverted by the white characters' oppression. Through the study of the narrative devices used by the writer, this paper analyzes the various acts of resistance put in place in an attempt to fight against white domination.

**Keywords:** Morrison Toni, black community, white domination, self-loathing, self-censorship

**Résumé :** Cet article vise à montrer la manière dont la communauté noire du premier roman de Toni Morrison est réduite au silence par l'oppression de la société américaine des années 40. Les manifestations de la soi-disant supériorité blanche dans le quotidien des personnages noirs sont si présentes et envahissantes que ces derniers se retrouvent privés de leur droit et de leur capacité à établir leurs propres normes sociétales. Les normes établies par les blancs sont donc internalisées par les noirs, dépouillés de la possibilité de s'exprimer. La privation de parole ainsi imposée perturbe le bon fonctionnement de leur communauté, pervertie par l'oppression. À travers une étude des procédés narratifs employés par l'auteure, cet article a pour objectif de mettre en relief les différentes formes de résistance mises en place dans l'optique de combattre la domination dont sont victimes les protagonistes.

**Mots-clés :** Morrison Toni, communauté noire, domination blanche, haine de soi, auto-censure

During his very first sexual intercourse, Cholly Breedlove, Toni Morrison's male protagonist in *The Bluest Eye*, was threatened by the long guns of two white men who forced him to keep having sex with his partner, Darlene. Cholly had no choice but to obey and simulate sex. Yet, against all odds, Cholly did not hate the men as a result and would only learn to hate white people later on<sup>1</sup>. Since he started hating *Darlene* instead, one is left to wonder why he first directed his hatred towards the girl, who was a victim just as he was, and not against those who threatened and humiliated him?

Racial tensions in American society in the 1940s are at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*. The novel tells the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, a girl who gets pregnant after being raped once—if not twice—by her father, loses her baby and becomes insane. Getting neither support nor protection from her family or other members of the black community, she fatally fails to find her place in a tough world controlled by Whites.

Through the viewpoints of several first-person narrators at various moments in the text, as well as through an omniscient narrator, the writer describes how the prevalence of racism leads black people to accept their inferior status, the most extreme example being Pecola. Unable to fight against the racism and rejection which inform their daily lives, the black characters in the novel struggle to survive. White power is asserted in many episodes like the aforementioned scene, leading characters such as Cholly to experience what Morrison's afterword calls "racial self-loathing" (167). Although a few characters react differently, like the main narrator, most prove unable to face the dominant group and are left frustrated, with a severely damaged self-esteem.

This analysis aims at showing how constant oppression incites Blacks to internalize white domination to the point of self-censorship, leading to perverted conflicts within their own community. I will first explain how, by being exposed to relentlessly humiliating and belittling situations, the characters progressively build up a sense of self-hatred that makes them incapable of rebelling against racism. Society becomes destructive for vulnerable and rejected characters such as Pecola, who are never given a chance to survive, be it by a white-dominated society or by their own community. Indeed, I will show that the characters are forced to imitate the oppressive system in which they live,

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<sup>1</sup> "He was, in time, to discover that hatred for white men—but not now." (118) All parenthetical references to the novel studied here are to the following edition: MORRISON, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*, London, Vintage, 1999.

and to transfer conflict within their own community. Finally, through a close study of the narrative devices used in the novel, the writer's very act of writing will be analyzed as a way to give a voice to silenced people.

### **Building up self-hatred**

The novel opens with a Dick and Jane primer, which supposedly portrays a typical American family of the 1940s:

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. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (1)

This primer, written in the form of a short story, is reminiscent of certain children's books. It relies on an early-learning game (in this case, finding out who is going to play with Jane) to encourage children to learn how to playfully look for a specific piece of information. It is composed of simple sentences (mostly subject-verb-complement sequences) with basic, often monosyllabic words, and describes characters who are supposed to be familiar elements in all children's lives. It lays emphasis on domestic life, starting as it does with the place where a family can typically be found: a house. The description of the house progressively moves from the outside (the house is "green and white") to the inside, as the red door invites one to step in to see who lives there. The text then focuses on one character at a time, making sure to introduce all the members of the family: the father, mother, children (Dick and Jane), and even their pets. Through the repetition of verbs such as "play", "laugh" and "smile", and the use of the adjective "happy", the idea of the fulfilling nature of family life is asserted.

This primer is highly ironic, however, as not every family in America can identify with such a description. Given such an example early on in their lives (this primer was commonly used in American schools at the time), children were taught the current norm and what being an average American middle-class family implied. Those who did not correspond to that description could only feel excluded. Indeed, the use of the determiner "the", and of "Mother" and "Father" as if those were proper nouns, suggests that only one type of (valuable) family exists. Likewise, the use of declarative ("He is big and strong") as well as imperative sentences ("Play, Jane, play") leaves no room for other types of families. Morrison thus uses this primer to show the discrepancy between American symbols and the harsh reality that some of her black characters have to face: unable to identify with the situation shown in the primer, they quickly understand that a typical American family means a suburban, middle-class (mostly white) family.

This first confrontation between white Americans' and black characters' lives is essential because it is indirect: no skin color being mentioned in the primer, it is impossible for Blacks to retaliate and defend themselves against such a pernicious attack. From an early age, black characters are thus exposed to the partial representation of a society which excludes them. By using different narrative viewpoints, Morrison shows various reactions to the overwhelming domination of white representation. Through Claudia MacTeer's first-person narrative, for instance, she displays a process of resistance against such a representation. Conversely, an omniscient narrator shows characters who unquestioningly submit to it, the best example being the Breedloves, presented as the absolute opposite of the family in the primer. For one thing, names such as Cholly and Pecola are quite uncommon, compared with Dick and Jane; the Breedloves live in a storefront, whereas the children in the primer inhabit a house; Pecola hardly has any friends to play with, unlike Jane; and the family does not even own a pet. Black characters like these become unable to call such representations into question or to demand more recognition; they grow to unconsciously adopt the point of view of their oppressors who, as one critic has pointed out, are "not just men—black or white—but the entire majority

culture that has perpetuated [a certain] standard in every channel available to them—from Saturday matinees to elementary school primers<sup>2</sup>". The majority's point of view is thus completely internalized.

To a certain degree this process is undergone by all black men or women. Its best illustrations are to be found in the frequent references to popular American actresses of the time. In the following passage, the narrator, Claudia MacTeer, recalls a discussion between her sister Frieda and Pecola, who has temporarily come to live with them, about their admiration for Shirley Temple:

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. (12-13)

Contrary to Frieda and Pecola, Claudia surprisingly refuses to abide by white-imposed beauty standards. By mimicking the two girls' discussion ("how cu-ute Shirley Temple was"), Claudia expresses her incomprehension at the other girls' admiration: she does not find Shirley Temple cute at all. The hyphenated adjective imitates how adults and those two girls speak when they see a child like Shirley Temple, insisting on her doll-like sweetness, her fair skin, blond hair, blue eyes, and rosy cheeks. Her mimicry shows not only the narrator's hatred for the actress, but also the scorn she feels for the other girls, whose admiration for blond-haired, blue-eyed actresses she cannot understand. The understatement in the next sentence ("I couldn't join them in their adoration") even reveals the hatred she feels for the actress or for any pretty, little, blond white girl, though that hatred goes unnoticed because she does not dare voice it and is content to mention that she prefers Jane Withers (13). The narrator's preference for this other white child actress is deliberate, as Jane Withers is dark-haired. Moreover, in a David Butler movie entitled *Bright Eyes*, Shirley Temple plays the lead part of a sweet, loving, blue-eyed child, while Jane Withers is the mean child who wants her out of her family. Such antagonism between the two actresses highlights Claudia's refusal of established standards of beauty. But her act of defiance is understood by neither of the girls: "They gave me a puzzled look, decided I was incomprehensible, and continued their reminiscing about old squint-eyed Shirley." (13) She is forced into silence because what does not fit into white societal norms is simply cast away.

Unlike Claudia, Pecola is extremely fond of Shirley Temple, and willing to spend as much time as possible contemplating her beauty: "We knew that [Pecola] was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face." (16) More than simply drinking milk (which, one must note, is white), holding the cup and drinking out of it reveals Pecola's wish to become as white, and thus as beautiful, as the young actress. Drinking out of the Shirley Temple cup is a way to "swallow its whiteness"<sup>3</sup>, just like eating Mary Jane candies implies eating Mary Jane herself:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (38)

The pseudo-cannibalistic act described is both the literal and metaphorical illustration of Pecola's internalization of white standards of beauty: she so wants to be white that she fantasizes about a physical transformation through candy ingestion. The short sentences ("Smiling white face.") insist on the innocent air on Shirley's face, making Pecola look like a predator. Pecola's admiration for Mary Jane's features, and her delight at eating them, are described as if in slow motion: the ternary rhythm ("eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane.") shows the progression and the process of metaphorical transformation. The insistence on her eyes echoes Pecola's dire wish not for blue eyes only, but for the bluest, as she believes they will make her beautiful to the world: "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes." (35) Just as the Queen in *Snow White* wishes to eat some of Snow White's body parts to ingest and possess her beauty, Pecola feels closer to getting blue eyes when in close contact with any of their representations.

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<sup>2</sup> DENARD, Carolyn, "The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in the Fiction of Toni Morrison", in Nelly McKay (ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co, 1988, p. 173.

<sup>3</sup> ROSENBERG, Ruth, "Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*", *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 21, n° 4, Winter 1987, p. 441.

Again like the Queen in *Snow White*, Pecola spends much time contemplating herself; but instead of looking at her beauty, she scrutinizes her own face to find the origins of her ugliness: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of her ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike.” (34) Given the impact that white standards of beauty had on her own mother, Pauline Breedlove, Pecola was doomed to loathe herself. Indeed, Pauline is fascinated by Hollywood movies to the point of (vainly) trying to imitate the beautiful white actresses on the screen:

I ‘member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. I looked just like her. Well, almost just like. Anyway, I sat in that show with my hair done up that way and had a good time. I thought I’d see it through to the end again, and I got up to get me some candy. I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. I don’t believe I ever did get over that. There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. (96)

Despite the devastating effect of that tooth loss, one cannot help but notice the humorous aspect of the passage: Pauline’s admission that she looked “almost just like” Jean Harlow underlines the slight exaggeration in her tone when recalling the incident. Also, the depiction of the scene inevitably underlines its ridiculous dimension: here is a pregnant black woman with a missing front tooth imitating Jean Harlow. The discrepancy between her tooth loss and her attempt at emulating the actress’s beauty thus reflects the reality she has to face, and her falling short of white standards of accomplishment.

There is no way for the two characters to escape the overwhelmingly powerful majority. White superiority is complete and unavoidable. Unlike Claudia, who is protected from racist attacks by parents who have “the inner strength to withstand the poverty and discrimination of a racist society and to provide an environment in which their children can grow<sup>4</sup>”, Pauline and Pecola never learn to love themselves, and their self-esteem is “summarily destroyed by their and the black community’s acceptance of the standards of feminine beauty glamorized by the majority white culture<sup>5</sup>”. For they are not isolated cases. The whole black community is convinced of their ugliness:

[The Breedloves] lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. [...] You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, ‘You are ugly people.’ 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. ‘Yes,’ they had said. ‘You are right.’ (28)

In a striking reference to slavery, the Breedloves are described as slaves to white-established beauty standards: they completely submit to this “master” and never question his judgement. The repetition of words and structures in this passage enhances the particularity of that family and sheds light on the progressive construction of their ugliness, while the progression from “lived there” to “stayed there”, and the two occurrences of the adjective “unique”, stress the idea of fixity in the Breedloves’ image and social status. Interestingly, the internalization of this ugliness is conveyed by the anaphora (“you looked”) and its implication that their ugliness cannot be objectively explained. It is the repetition of “conviction”, together with the pronoun “their”, which strikes the final blow: their ugliness is the result of a self-constructed image based on the omnipresence of the only beauty standards deemed acceptable.

One must admit that the Breedloves are not described as particularly handsome people:

The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. (28)

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<sup>4</sup> KLOTMAN, Phyllis R., “Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*”, *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 13, n°4, Winter 1979, p. 124.

<sup>5</sup> DENARD, Carolyn, “The Convergence of Feminism . . .”, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

The description shows an absence of harmony, underlined by sharp contrasts and depreciative terms. In point of fact, it is not the characters' ugliness that is aggressive, but the omniscient narrator's response to it: their physical appearance is so different from society's aesthetic norms that it triggers violent reactions. Still, they are the ones who become "aggressively ugly" as that negative reaction is transferred from the dominant to the dominated ethnic group, especially to its most vulnerable members, i.e. those who have fully accepted the social codes in place.

Being convinced of their own ugliness, they trigger the rest of the community's contempt for those who cannot even love themselves. The Breedloves' inability to relate "the source" of their ugliness to the way Whites treat them perfectly illustrates the process of internalization fully carried out by the oppressed—what Du Bois calls the state of "double consciousness"<sup>6</sup>. Instead of blaming the oppressors who forced them into their low condition, they end up blaming themselves. Any direct conflict with Whites is thus avoided, and the frustration created by their racism remains contained within the dominated community.

### **Perverted conflicts**

Open conflicts are scarce in *The Bluest Eye*. In fact, most of the time, the few conflicts present in the text do not pit black characters against white ones, but rather colored people (i.e. any non-white person, including mulattoes) against black ones—or more often still, black people against other black people. Such is the case in the following scene where Pecola is bullied after school by a group of black boys, who make fun of her and her father:

A group of boys was circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove. [...] That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. [...] They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. [...] Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands. (50)

Through references to various literary and cultural traditions, like the "Danse Macabre" motif, Morrison stages the ominous arrival of death: the boys, like bad omens, surround Pecola to make sure she does not escape her fate and to take her along with them in their downfall. Although she does not die herself, she ends up surrounded by the deaths of her baby, her father, and her innocence. The people of her own community choose her as their scapegoat: she will go through the hell of oppression in their stead.

The confrontation between Pecola and the black boys stems from the absence of open conflicts with Whites and from black people's inability to fight back racism. White oppression is so well established that trying to resist it would inevitably lead Blacks to defeat; but *not* trying leads to self-destruction. As a result, the frustration, humiliation and anger pent up in black people is unleashed against still weaker characters among their own community. In that scene, though they are Pecola's social peers, the boys make fun of her so as not to be made fun of themselves. By bullying Pecola because of her skin, the boys condemn their own blackness ("It was their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth"). This is their only chance of survival, but they also unconsciously perpetuate the process of self-destruction induced in them by the omnipotent white majority.

The whole novel portrays various black characters who go from being victims to becoming torturers or executioners. This process applies for instance to both Pecola's parents, who mistreat each other as well as their children, their daughter in particular. This illustrates what Alain Badiou calls the "latent force of the dominated [...] diverted from its true course": instead of using their "latent force", born of daily injustice, against their enemies, the Breedloves use it against characters who have not harmed them. Such misdirection "drives the machinations of the dominators"<sup>7</sup> since the resulting perversion is precisely what the dominators were aiming at. In other words, turning Blacks against their own people enables Whites to prevent any kind of empowerment of the black minority. Hence, the dominated group's perverted reaction strengthens its dominators even more.

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<sup>6</sup> DU BOIS, William E. B., *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York, Blue Heron Press, 1953, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> BADIOU, Alain, "Rancière and the Community of Equals", *Metapolitics*, translated by Jason Barker, London and New York, Verso, 2005, p. 109.

Taking up once again the example of Cholly's first sexual intercourse, it is certain that resisting the two white men's voyeurism and perversion would have threatened his life—not only because they were pointing their guns at him, but also because, as a young black man, he had no power over them:

[...] Darlene froze and cried out. He thought he had hurt her, but when he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder. He jerked around.  
There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flashlight. [...] Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up all in one motion. The men had long guns.  
'Hee hee heeeee.' The snicker was a long asthmatic cough.  
The other raced the flashlight all over Cholly and Darlene.  
'Get on wid it, nigger,' said the flashlight one.  
'Sir?' said Cholly [...].  
'I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good.'  
[...] The flashlight man lifted his gun down from his shoulder, and Cholly heard the cllop of metal. He dropped back to his knees. (115-116)

Cholly's mix of fear, anger and powerlessness must be repressed in an act of survival; to save his life, he "drops back to his knees", thus acknowledging his inferiority and his submission to white power. But instead of being angry at the white men, Cholly blames Darlene for being "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The [white men's] hee-hee-hee's." (118) Cholly's strength and virility are taken away from him, turning him into a weak and vulnerable "coon baby" (117), as the hunters call him. He is not even aware of the perversion of his feelings; or if he is, he goes along with that perversion so as to regain a sense of power: "he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. [...] His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him." (118) The difference between his attitude to the two men and to Darlene points to this: while he fails to defend his partner or himself and respectfully calls one of the men "Sir", he "raise[s] himself in silence" (117) after their departure, not even taking the trouble to talk to her. Although he withholds the violence that surges in him against Darlene, his disdain is perceptible: "Cholly wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her leg with his foot. 'We got to get [sic], girl. Come on!'" (117) A victim herself, Darlene deserves just as much comfort as he does, but Cholly is unable to help her overcome this trauma. His aggressive talk, together with his refusal to touch her or even help her get up, highlights Cholly's capitulation to white power and his inability to deal with his own weakness.

In order to describe the processes experienced by some of the black characters, leading them to mistreat members of their own community, the writer alternates between different narrative viewpoints, oscillating between Claudia's internal viewpoint and an omniscient narrator. While internal focalization allows Claudia to express her resistance to white domination, the omniscient narrator presents the other characters' compliance with the standards of beauty imposed on them. By alternating between different viewpoints and allowing characters to narrate their own story, Morrison succeeds in showing how black people unconsciously transfer white racism into their own group. Becoming persecutors themselves, they uphold the total control which Whites enjoy over Blacks, thus confirming the latter's inferior social status and their absence of self-respect.

Pecola's mother is one of the characters temporarily given a narrative role through internal focalization. Though unlike Cholly, in the sense that the latter is never given a voice or the chance to get his story told in a first-person narrative, Pauline does resemble him in that she is barely aware of her own process of self-censorship. True, she admits to having given in to white superiority after losing a front tooth when she confesses: "Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly." (96) But unaware that the destruction of her self-esteem stems from white-imposed standards, she is incapable of fighting white omnipotence or of protecting her family. Instead, she chooses to elevate herself by seeing her family as her burden:

Mrs. Breedlove considered herself an upright and Christian woman, burdened with a no-count man, whom God wanted her to punish. [...] She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. (31)

The sloppier Pauline's looks get, the stronger her belief in her divine mission: "She let another tooth fall [...]. Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." (98) Just like Cholly, she is unable to confront her oppressors, be they white Hollywood beauties displayed on cinema screens, or the few black women who "were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair" (92), or the hospital doctor who compares her to a horse, claiming that black women "deliver [babies] right away and with no pain" (97). She therefore looks for a more accessible opponent: her own family. Taking up the role of the savior, Pauline draws a parallel between her family situation and Jesus's: like him, she wears a crown of thorns and carries a heavy cross. By "[assigning] herself a role in the scheme of things" (98), she gives a meaning to a life that has gone wrong, and vindicates the salvation of her family as her responsibility through self-sacrifice.

The Breedloves' inability to protect one another results in a form of miscommunication which makes each of them even lonelier. This isolation is epitomized in the linguistic failure which attends their confrontations: whenever these characters engage in open conflicts, their inaptitude for speech reveals their incapacity to stand up for themselves. Cholly and Pauline's fights, for example, are silent: "They did not talk, groan, or curse during these beatings. There was only the muted sound of falling things, and flesh on unsurprised flesh." (32) Their wordless fights are echoed by their own surroundings in the sense that even the sound of "falling things" is dimmed, as if the characters' incapacity to speak out against racism and injustice had contaminated their environment. In other words, they are kept out of the world, isolated in their own disdain of themselves, and trapped in poor, racially discriminatory living conditions. The real reason for the Breedloves' fights is the frustration they are made to feel for being black.

Revealingly, the only time Pauline is portrayed as neither violent nor abusive is in her interaction with the white family for whom she works. The contrast in how she treats her own daughter and her little white charge is striking:

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication.  
 'Crazy fool... my floor, mess... look what you... work... get on out... now that... crazy... my floor, my floor... my floor.' Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread.  
 The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her.  
 'Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it.'" (84-85)

Whereas she strikes Pecola and barely talks to her, Pauline's attitude radically changes in her dealings with the little white girl. The soothing words she lovingly warbles to her ("Hush, baby, hush") contrast with the inchoate sentences she uses when scolding Pecola ("look what you... work... get on out... now that..."), and signal her attempt at erasing any proof of her blackness. "Polly," the nickname given her by the white family, also indicates a change of identity when dealing with those she so admires. By not bothering to introduce Pecola to the white girl, she symbolically disowns her, denying her the right to claim her identity as her daughter: "'Who were they, Polly?' 'Don't worry none, baby.'" (85) In fact, her own daughter has to call her "Mrs. Breedlove" (83).

Unlike her parents, Pecola is not given the right to narrate her own story. As "the most delicate member of a society: a child; the most vulnerable member; a female", to quote Morrison in her afterword (168), Pecola's chances of survival in an oppressive society are null, the members of her own family and of her community being too weak to protect her. Her submission to white superiority makes her unable to defend herself. The episode at Mr. Yacobowski's store when she wants to buy sweets illustrates this idea quite well:

She points her finger at the Mary Janes—a little black shaft of finger, its tip pressed on the display window. The quietly inoffensive assertion of a black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult.  
 'Them.' The word is more sigh than sense.  
 'What? These? These?' [...]  
 She shakes her head, her fingertip fixed on the spot which, in her view, at any rate, identifies the Mary Janes. He cannot see her view—the angle of his vision, the slant of her finger, makes it incomprehensible to him. [...]  
 'Christ. Kantcha talk?'  
 [...] She nods.  
 'Well, why'nt you say so? One? How many?'  
 Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb. (37)

Hardly any verbal exchange is heard in this dialogue. Besides the fact that the female child/male adult confrontation is highly asymmetrical, the white man's attitude to the black girl is racially discriminatory. Pecola's shyness and uneasiness is enhanced by Yacobowski's aggressiveness, perceptible in his monosyllables, since he does not bother to make full sentences when addressing her. His impatient refusal to understand her is underlined by his profusion of questions, which Pecola has no time to answer: "What? These? These? [...] One? How many?" Even small acts such as buying sweets thus become an ordeal: the omniscient narrator reveals the "shame" felt by Pecola, a feeling which is only "inexplicable" because it is produced by her skin color. Faced with an oppressor who "does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see" (36), she is silenced and unable to order what she wants. As a consequence, the only moment she is given a voice occurs too late, at the very end of the novel:

They are bluer, aren't they?  
*Oh yes. Much bluer.*  
Bluer than Joanna's?  
*Much bluer than Joanna's.*  
And bluer than Michelena's?  
*Much bluer than Michelena's.*  
I thought so. Did Michelena say anything to you about my eyes?  
*No. Nothing.*  
Did you say anything to her?  
*No.*  
How come?  
*How come what?*  
How come you don't talk to anybody?  
*I talk to you.*  
Besides me.  
*I don't like anybody besides you. (155-156)*

Once raped and impregnated by her father, Pecola is definitely rejected by her community. In that conversation with herself, the italicized replies supposedly spoken by her friend are mere repeats of Pecola's words, a mirror effect which emphasizes her interlocutor's imaginary existence. Never given a voice or a friend to talk to, Pecola symbolizes the ultimate silenced victim of white racism and domination.

### **Voicing what has been silenced**

Who, then, speaks for the ones who cannot? The novel's structure underlines the mental mess in which the characters find themselves, following more or less a chronological order, though punctuated by the interventions of characters who temporarily supplement the main narrator and add analepses to the main narrative. Moreover, the use of third-person narratives enables the reader to understand the process of unconscious self-censorship that the characters undergo.

Claudia MacTeer's first-person narrative, on the other hand, enables her to alternate between childhood memories and her perception of Pecola's tragedy as a grown-up, giving her the necessary distance to assess events: "There is really nothing to say –except *why*. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*." (4) The incipit, ending with such a sentence, asserts the narrator's decision to take up the challenge of telling what is indescribable, of speaking the unspeakable: incest and rape, of course, but not only that. According to Lynn Orilla Scott, Morrison "explore[s] ways in which a discourse of incest obscures other 'tabooed' subjects that are, in fact, more 'unspeakable' than incest. For Morrison that subject is racial self-loathing [...]"<sup>8</sup>. Thus the silencing of Pecola is only the result of such a taboo, a racially charged form of control:

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<sup>8</sup> SCOTT, Lynn Orilla, "Revising the incest story: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and James Baldwin's *Just Above My Head*", in KING, Lovalerie and SCOTT, Lynn Orilla (eds.), *James Baldwin and Toni Morrison: Comparative Critical and Theoretical Essays*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, p. 84.



The incest makes Pecola a taboo figure in the community, and as such, she is used to uphold a system of white dominance and black racial self-loathing that we understand to be the very cause of the rape/incest in the first place. Thus, incest (and its taboo) circulates as a form of social control.<sup>9</sup>

What is visible in Claudia's narration is that Morrison goes beyond that taboo, "[q]uiet as it's kept" (4), and voices it. By occasionally inserting into Pecola's story bits of stories from the lives of other characters (such as Pecola's parents, or a mulatto named Geraldine, or a self-proclaimed minister called Soaphead Church), all of them indirectly contributing to her downfall, the novel involves readers through a sort of confusion, forcing them to put the pieces back together. For instance, hints dropped when Pecola visits Soaphead Church to get blue eyes can only be understood afterwards: Pecola's "little protruding pot of tummy" (137) and her nauseous feeling ("the odor of the dark, sticky meat made her want to vomit", 139) echo Claudia's introductory reference to Pecola's pregnancy in the first few pages of the novel. A confirmation is given later on: "Did you hear about that girl?' 'What? Pregnant?' 'Yas. But guess who?' [...] 'Cholly? Her daddy?'" (148) By scattering such bits and pieces and obliging her readers to go through a process of detail collection, Morrison entices them to look beyond the discourse of incest and see what has been obscured, thus denouncing the Whites' "social control".

By bringing to light the mechanism of social and racial discrimination that lies behind Pecola's story, Morrison makes it visible. Moreover, she destroys the white middle-class myth that "incest does not take place in the white middle-class family [but] is a vice of class and racial others who lack the rationality necessary to control their impulses", thus "justify[ing] the social and political hegemony of the white middle class."<sup>10</sup> It is clear that Pecola's rape is the result of the long series of traumatizing events which started in her parents' youth and led to the disappearance of moral and social codes from their lives. All those events—like Cholly's abandonment, the winter nights he spent in bed with Aunt Jimmy to keep warm, her death, the traumatizing episode with Darlene and the hunters, and his father's rejection of him when he went to find him—explain why Cholly's sense of moral values and his ideas of parenthood have never been nurtured. "Having no idea of how to raise children; and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be." (126) Because Pecola reminds him of Pauline on first meeting her, he ends up showing his love for his daughter in the same way he loved his wife.

Likewise, Morrison's play with the primer leaves no doubt as to her intention of debunking the image of the ideal average American family depicted in it. The novel opens with the primer as it was originally written, but this is then followed by a second version, and a third, offering the same text with varying typographies. Reading three versions of the same text one after the other, one is compelled to notice not only a rhythmic, but also a semantic, change in the word strings. One possible meaning of such a deconstruction is that the writer thereby affirms her refusal to use white standards to define her art: "[Morrison's] manipulation of the primer is meant to suggest, finally, the inappropriateness of the white voice's attempt to authorize or authenticate the black text or to dictate the contours of Afro-American art."<sup>11</sup> Though seemingly playing with the primer in an innocent way, the last two versions—in which all punctuation marks and capital letters, then all spaces, are erased—actually call into question its original signification and relevance:

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 see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane [...] (1)

Using a modified version of the primer thus manifests the writer's resistance to the social and artistic standards established by Whites. The third version becomes unreadable :

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjane [...] (2)

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<sup>9</sup> *Idem*, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> WILSON, Elizabeth, "Not in this house: Incest, Denial and Doubt in the White Middle-Class Family", *Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 8, 1995, p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> AWKWARD, Michael, "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", in MCKAY, Nelly (ed.), *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*, Boston, G. K. Hall & Co, 1988, p. 59.

Such a confusing text epitomizes Morrison's rejection of the *cliché* representation of what an American family should be. The visual effect created catches the eye of the reader, who understands from the outset that close attention will need to be paid to the writer's manipulation of language. As Margaret B. Wilkerson states,

A dramatist must be a good storyteller who knows precisely where to begin her tale so that the precious onstage time is used effectively. Morrison always begins her narrative with an arresting event [like] the presentation (casual in its tone) of a child having her father's baby [...]<sup>12</sup>.

The discrepancy between content and narration must be closely analyzed. On the one hand, this discrepancy corroborates the impression of a young narrator, as the simplicity with which the news is announced reminds the reader of a child's incapacity to understand the implications of many happenings: "We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." (4) On the other hand, such a falsely casual tone renders the announcement even more shocking for the reader, who would have expected a more solemn or dramatic tone for a topic of that kind. The paradox of *The Bluest Eye* thus lies in the discrepancy between the plot seen through the eyes of a character who does not seem to grasp the ins and outs of the situation, and the punchy accuracy of Morrison's writing.

As Wilkerson argues, Morrison's novels are marked by a strong dramatic voice: "Her characters are complex and well-developed; conflict is sharply defined; dialogue is crisp, revealing, and concise; climatic scenes are often handled through dialogue<sup>13</sup>". But more than that, it is Morrison's use of what Cat Moses calls "the blues aesthetic" that makes her writing unique. The structure of the narrative in *The Bluest Eye* "follows a pattern common to traditional blues lyrics: a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion<sup>14</sup>". Claudia introduces the situation (the loss of their friend Pecola, of Pecola's baby, of her own innocence) before declaring her intention to try and explain (and come to terms with) what happened. Just as the task of the blues singer is the "transformation of lack, loss, and grief into poetic catharsis<sup>15</sup>", Claudia's task is to transform the Breedloves' lack of self-esteem, the loss of Pecola's baby and her own grief over Pecola's tragic fate into a story which will allow the community to overcome the trauma. Following the oral tradition of testifying, which is "rooted in African American religious practice and can be traced to West African song and speech<sup>16</sup>", Claudia denounces her community's responsibility in Pecola's tragedy: "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." (163) Likewise, just as blues lyrics offer no closure, Claudia offers none for Pecola's story. This aesthetic is what distinguishes Morrison's style from what could be considered as the more traditional styles of "dead white males", who precisely did not rely on a blues aesthetic or on African American oral traditions in their own works. But though her style constitutes a form of resistance against the norms set by various white writers, it is important to note that Morrison's writing can indeed be compared to that of other white American writers like William Carlos Williams. Indeed, comparing Morrison's and Williams's reflections on beauty "illustrate[s] simultaneously a shared tradition in American writing, [as well as] cultural and racial distinctions that inform their interpretation of, and experience with, beauty<sup>17</sup>".

Consequently, it would be too simplistic to read *The Bluest Eye* as a mere condemnation of racist hegemony. Although Morrison stated in various interviews that she wrote for black people<sup>18</sup>,

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<sup>12</sup> WILKERSON, Margaret B., "The Dramatic Voice in Toni Morrison's Novels", *idem*, p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> MOSES, Cat, "The Blues Aesthetic in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", *African American Review*, vol. 33, n°4, Winter 1999, 623.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, p. 629.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 632.

<sup>17</sup> HEINZE, Denise, *The Dilemma of Double-consciousness: Toni Morrison's Novels*, Athens, Georgia, U of Georgia P, 1993, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> In an interview with Cecil Brown, MORRISON declares: "I have not seen and cannot think of any black female writer who is interested in being taken up by the white male power structure." She then opposes black male writers who "are males... [who] like to win. [Who] want to know who is on top. [Who] want to be recognized by white men as the best" (468) and black female writers who are "unwilling to participate in a capitalistic search-

one can wonder how such a claim should be understood: should white readers feel rejected?<sup>19</sup> Is her novel meant to denounce and condemn white people's abuse of power? Morrison undeniably denounces her white characters' abuse of power, but her focus is primarily on her black characters and their attitude to discrimination. One could then argue that the novel was written for Blacks only, but Morrison's writing goes beyond such a simple black and white dichotomy: she describes her writing as "race-specific yet race-free prose" in her afterword (169). "Race-specific", on the one hand, because she does write for black people, as she asserted in an interview with *The Guardian*.<sup>20</sup> Her protagonists are black and represent that community. Through the character of Pauline, for instance, she aims at reproducing pronunciations ("chil'ren") or elided words ("I 'member" or "'cause") or misconjugated verbs ("I be hanging wash and I knowed lifting weren't good for me") which she has indeed heard.<sup>21</sup> And yet her writing is also "race-free" in the sense that it leads to "the public exposure of a private confidence", and reflects "the disclosure of secrets, secrets 'we' shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community." (169) In other words, she depicts human beings faced with a horrifying situation, and her focus on human pain and feelings makes her novel accessible to anyone, regardless of their race. Anybody should empathize with these characters, the scope of whose stories is not limited to mere skin color matters.

In *The Bluest Eye*, overwhelmed by the Whites' superior power, black characters lose their voices and their self-esteem. The self-hatred that they internalize prevents them from offering any kind of resistance to their oppressors. In order to survive and avoid self-destruction, they are led to destroy others. Forbidding themselves to fight against a form of racism which constantly victimizes them, they choose instead—unconsciously, most of the time—to assert their power over weaker people who, in turn, replicate the same process on yet weaker victims. In a way, they accept the oppressive system in which they live.

Nonetheless, a few characters do try to resist. Through her account of Pecola's tragedy, Claudia, the main narrator, finds a way of exposing the oppression that stunts her community. Even though her narrative barely provides the comfort she wishes for, the silenced conflicts of the past do not go unheard and cannot be erased anymore because they have been put down on paper. As a consequence, story-telling in itself is an act of resistance. On a larger scale, Morrison's work may also be perceived as an act of resistance, although she "questions the very act of story-telling".<sup>22</sup> Her writing remains a "powerfully regenerative voice" that "edges towards redemption",<sup>23</sup> even if a sense of closure is never quite achieved.

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and-destroy mission that white people frequently get black people into." (BROWN, Cecil, "Interview with Toni Morrison", *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 36, n°3, Autumn 1995, p. 468)

<sup>19</sup> Given the writer's worldwide success, I would argue that her texts never intended to make white readers feel excluded—and that they certainly never felt so.

<sup>20</sup> See HOBY, Hermione, "Interview. Toni Morrison: 'I'm writing for black people... I don't have to apologise'", *The Guardian*, 25 April 2015. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/25/toni-morrison-books-interview-god-help-the-child>>, accessed on 30 August 2018.

<sup>21</sup> See Toni MORRISON, *op. cit.*, p. 92, 96-97.

<sup>22</sup> DITTMAR, Linda "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?' The Politics of Form in *The Bluest Eye*", *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol.23, n°2, Winter 1990, p. 142.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

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