

TEACHING TONI MORRISON

Unlearning Our Internal Message of Inadequacy

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One of the reasons we read literature is to stand in someone else's shoes a half a world away and, through their eyes, experience their lives, their cultures and their (non)resolutions of problems or questions. With that (literary) experience we can perhaps minimize the distance between our respective cultures and come to some kind of understanding of our own sense of place in the cosmic order and see pathways we might not have perceived were we to concentrate only on our day-to-day chronicles of discontent.

Students can study an article or hear a lecture on "internalized oppression" and reach an intellectual conceptualization of how the psychology works to maintain the status quo of Powers that Be. Yet nothing can bring that meaning into a concrete reality peopled by real characters who suffer in the way Toni Morrison does, especially in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*. Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* didn't exactly hit the best-seller list. As a matter of fact, I looked for the novel prior to Toni Morrison's winning of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 and found the English version not available and the Japanese translation out of print. After 1993, however, new editions in both languages were issued, making the novel available for use in our classrooms.

Toni Morrison's novels are rich in the psychological complexity of the devastating effects of racism on the black community. There are no major white characters in Morrison's novels, because they don't need to be there. Morrison

herself says that she wants to write about only black people and about the black community. “What would life be like if they weren’t there?” she asks a PBS interviewer in 1998.¹ Yet white people, or at least the Power they represent, haunt Morrison’s stories and her characters and loom as controls in the collective subconscious of the community she would free.

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, February 13, 1931, but was called Toni by her friends. Her parents had come up from the South to find work, her father a shipbuilder and her mother a housewife. They lived in a racially mixed neighborhood where someone set fire to their house to drive them away.² This event, according to Morrison, reinforced her father’s sense of moral superiority with respect to white people. Both parents encouraged her to go on to college, so she did, graduating from Howard University in 1953. She was married for seven years, bearing two sons. After her divorce, she found herself a single mother raising two children in New York City, where she worked as an editor. It was there, commuting to work on the subway, that she wrote *The Bluest Eye*. “I wanted to describe the marrow, the bone (of racism) and how racism actually hurts,” she said, talking about this first story. All of her fiction is in some way about black people wrestling with the racism of U.S. society. Morrison feels a “responsibility to society, to make my activities stand for something. I mean we owe it to all those children who got blown to bits in the Sixties and Seventies.”³

The Bluest Eye was written at the height of the Civil Rights Movement and published in 1970, but instead of giving us heroic figures who transcend their backgrounds and triumph in a racist society learning to fight back, like the characters in *The Color Purple*, for example, by Alice Walker, another African-

¹ PBS interview, *A World of Ideas with Bill Moyers*, 1994(?), after Toni Morrison won the Nobel Prize for Literature.

² PBS interview.

³ PBS interview.

American writer, Morrison takes us down a darker path. No one in *The Bluest Eye* grows much in awareness, except for the narrator, Claudia. No one, not even the observant, angry Claudia, is very likeable. In fact, my students don't remember the names of the main characters of *The Bluest Eye*, but remember very well the horrific incidents that warp them into dysfunction, violence and madness. On the other hand, students generally love the main characters of *The Color Purple* and remember the names long after the year of study is over. One reason is, perhaps, that Walker's characters almost from the beginning intuitively understand the process of internalized oppression but lack the means, in the beginning, to overcome their situations. With love and compassion from others, the main characters are able to grow spiritually and come to understand what is needed to become a truly full person. Toni Morrison postulates a world where there is little love and less compassion in *The Bluest Eye*. The only character to recognize everyone's captivity in the invisible, but nevertheless real, chains of internalized racism, Claudia, is powerless herself to help Pecola, the little girl most crushed by these powerful forces that dehumanize. She can only comment on the experiences years after the fact, years after her and Pecola's childhood are colored by an adult black community that seethes in self-hatred.

Before turning to a textual analysis of *The Bluest Eye*, I'd like to clarify just what it is when I speak of "internalized oppression." Suzanne Pharr, author and activist, writes that one common element of the various oppressions (sexism, racism, classism, anti-Semitism...) is "a *defined norm*, a standard of rightness and often righteousness, wherein all others are judged in relation to it. This norm must be backed up with institutional power, economic power, and both institutional and individual violence."⁴

In the case of African-Americans, the defined norm is white. Beauty,

⁴ Pharr, Suzanne, "The Common Elements of Oppression," *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, Women's Publisher, Expanded Edition, August 1997, p. 53.

truth, goodness, subjective values all are measured through the eyes of white people. Toni Morrison understands this mechanism extremely well, as she has her narrator receive a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll for Christmas, which she promptly tears to pieces. "I destroyed white baby dolls...but the truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls...to discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others."⁵

Claudia hates the fact that white girls are automatically considered cute or pretty while she, as a black girl, can only be expected to appreciate this beauty. Her resentment expressed violently, eventually shifts from hatred to shame to a fraudulent love. Even this very aware narrator is not beyond the crushing weight of the defined standards. Everyone outside the "normal" color is in a no-win situation and can't help the creeping sense of self-loathing.

Surely no victims of self-hatred are more pathetic than the Breedlove family, the parents Cholly and Pauline, and the little girl Pecola, who wants blue eyes. Unlike Claudia, Pecola has no sense of outrage about standards of beauty that define her as ugly. Pecola wholeheartedly accepts her ugliness and blames herself for her parents' constant quarreling. Drunk, savage Cholly we can partially understand because he was humiliated as a young boy by two white men who caught him making love to a girl in the bushes on a summer night. Instead of hating his oppressors and fighting back against the white men, he turns his anger on his girlfriend, as he later will turn it inward and outward toward his family.

⁵ Morrison, Toni, *The Bluest Eye*, Washington Square Press, Pocket Books (New York), p. 22.

Pharr writes:

As one takes in the negative messages and stereotypes, there is a weakening of self-esteem, self pride and group pride when the victim of the oppression is led to believe the negative views of the oppressor, this phenomenon is called *internalized oppression*. It takes the form of self-hatred which can express itself in depression, despair and self-abuse....Sometimes the internalized oppression is acted out as *horizontal hostility*. If one has learned self-hatred because of one's membership in a "minority" group, then that disrespect and hatred can easily be extended to the entire group....It is safer to express hostility toward other oppressed peoples than toward the oppressor.⁶

Consequently, Cholly can turn his violence to his girlfriend and, later, to Pauline, his wife. Pecola hears and sees this never-ending quarrel and blames her ugliness for her parent's unhappiness. She wishes to disappear, but "try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear."⁷ Where else but in the eyes reside our concepts of beauty and trust? If the eyes could be truly judged beautiful, wouldn't that translate into love and affection? Pecola's innocent passion to change the color of her eyes reflects to just what extent she has absorbed the dominant society's message. In a sense, since no non-white can ever be beautiful, can any non-white ever expect to love or be loved?

Pecola's mother, Pauline, colludes in the self-hatred already condemning herself to an ugliness she blames on her life with Cholly. Pauline has a bad foot and limps, but it is when she loses a tooth that she comes to understand how ugly she is. She has absorbed the white world's vision of physical beauty through her love of movies. How many times can black women watch what the

⁶ Pharr, op cit., p. 61.

⁷ Morrison, p. 39.

society deems beautiful and graceful through the blond characters such as Jean Harlow or Greta Garbo, and not come up short? Yes, Pauline learns about romantic love and physical beauty from film—"probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap."⁸ This self-contempt leads her to chip away at Cholly's self-respect, for the whole situation of her life has to be someone's fault, and her family is an easy target. The cycle of violence and blame whirl around this sad home and drives Pecola into a madness so complete and so isolated, no one can come in to threaten her solid illusion that she has miraculously received blue eyes. "The family destruction and the madness of Pecola were a stinging indictment by Morrison of what happens to individuals whose personhood and beauty are negated summarily by the society in which they live."⁹

My students can sympathize with Cholly and Pauline's predicament and despair that these characters are all ultimately not tragic but merely pathetic because of their lack of awareness. If I suggest an exercise like advising the Breedloves, my students usually advise fighting back or standing up to whites. Aren't we all caught, however, in the insidious standards of physical beauty set by white, middle-class America? When asked, my students describe a beautiful woman and handsome man who have physical characteristics very few of them do. We come to realize our "ugliness" and maybe even laugh about it. Nonetheless, our unconscious acceptance of those same standards that drive Pecola mad are working on us, too, we conclude as a class.

The central horror of the story, the scene where Cholly rapes Pecola, is

⁸ Morrison, p. 97.

⁹ Hine, Darlene Clark, Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *Black Women in America*, Vol. II, University of Indiana Press, 1993, p. 816.

all the more horrible because Morrison has given us the psychological depth to understand Cholly, but not to excuse him. We are clearly made to see the repeated humiliations by a white society who could care less about the self-destructive rage building up inside him, and a black community who swallows the mainstream's poisoned brew of stereotypes and standards and thus rejects him as worthless. This leads him to the drunken afternoon he staggers home to find his daughter hunched over washing dishes. He hates her, he loves her. He knows she unquestionably loves him and that knowledge infuriates him.

How dare she love him?...What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love?¹⁰

Exactly. How can someone love another if one doesn't have any self-respect or love for oneself? And so it is he can pull her down to the kitchen floor and allow his lust to take him where it will, and when the act is done, he looks down on her limp form. "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her."¹¹

With this act, Cholly pushes Pecola over the edge into madness. She seeks out the help of a fraudulent spiritualist, Soaphead Church, to help her get blue eyes, for if she has blue eyes and becomes beautiful, perhaps then all will be right with the universe; she'll have the Ozzie and Harriet family Americans still seem to dream of, one in which the loving members' biggest problem is whether to have roast beef or chicken for dinner. Soaphead Church directs her to feed (unbeknownst to her) poisoned meat to an irritating dog that Soaphead wants dead, telling Pecola if the dog acts strangely, then her wish for blue eyes will come true. His light cruelty to both the dog and Pecola cause both their deaths in a sense. Pecola slips over into a world in which no one can reach her,

¹⁰ Morrison, p. 127.

¹¹ Morrison, p. 129.

no one can tell her she doesn't need the blue eyes she now sees reflected when she looks in the mirror. She has "the bluest eye," so surely she must be loved and admired. In her crazy muttering, we have Morrison's answer to the question, "can little black girls grow up whole human beings?"

As for Cholly, what do we do with him? I ask my students to be judges at his "trial," and decide first whether he is guilty or innocent of rape, giving the possible American defense of "not guilty by reason of insanity" as a choice. Then, if they decide he is guilty, what kind of penalty would they assign to him for his crime? Over the years, most students do find Cholly guilty, but due to the mitigating circumstances, sentence him to a mental institution or to community service. The students decide that ultimately the individual must accept most, if not all, of the responsibility for his actions, even if we understand what drove him was the self-loathing he developed growing up in such a racist environment as American society.

Students want to care for Pecola, reassure her that she is loved, that they will respect her and love her as all humans deserve to be. They would counsel her and they imagine her coming out of her madness to grow in awareness and self-acceptance. They argue with Morrison's own conclusion, in which Claudia, the narrator, insists it was us, all of us, who share Soaphead Church's evil deceit of an innocent little black girl who "yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment."¹² Claudia and her sister planted marigolds hoping that Pecola's baby, conceived in the rape, would be born and survive. Neither the marigolds sprout nor does the baby. Both die in the (American) soil, which is bad for certain kinds of flowers.

Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the

¹² Morrison, p. 158.

victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late.¹³

Is it? Too late? Is it too late for us to move beyond the mire of our respective societies that teach us to despise difference? That sometimes sees elementary school teachers bully students for having impure blood? That votes in a governor such as Shintaro Ishihara who glorifies the rape of Korea? For my own America that assumes 4,000 civilian Iraqi deaths are worth an invasion and power realignment in the U.S. favor?

Toni Morrison feels that a novel should "have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the door and points the way. Something in it that suggest what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe."¹⁴

The only people who never despised Pecola were the three whores who lived above the Breedlove family. China, Poland and Miss Marie, the whores at the bottom of the social scale. They, along with Claudia, very clearly see the hypocrisies of a black community's betrayal of their own, but unlike Claudia, have nothing to gain in triumphing over an innocent girl. They loved Pecola unconditionally and cackled over the flaws and foibles of the men who came to them and their righteous women, who turned blind eyes to their husbands' philandering. China, Poland and Miss Marie represent the only slim hope here. It is among the most socially outcast that a consciousness could grow. Morrison's last little bit of irony, but perhaps a message my class and I might someday understand. Perhaps, after all, with the study of Morrison, it is *not* much, much, much too late.

¹³ Morrison, p. 160.

¹⁴ Morrison, Toni, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in Mari Evans, ed. *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): A Critical Evaluation*, Anchor Books, Anchor Press Doubleday (New York), 1983, p. 341.