CHAPTER 1

The Bluest Eye and *Sula*

The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye (1970), Morrison's first novel, juxtaposes two moments in twentieth-century US culture. The novel centers on a set of traumatic events in the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl, in the 1940s. Claudia MacTeer, Pecola's friend and the principal narrator, reflects upon these events both from her childhood point of view and from her adult perspective in the late 1960s. In its heightened attention to the politics of aesthetics, *The Bluest Eye* is certainly born out of the racial self-consciousness of the 1960s. But the novel also evokes the advantages and liabilities black migrants from the South encountered as they adapted to their new lives in the North (in this case, Lorain, Ohio) during the postwar era. In seeking wider opportunities for themselves and their children, they escaped the most virulent forms of racial oppression. But they risked becoming alienated from the values and practices that had sustained previous generations of African Americans.

In *The Bluest Eye*, this sense of alienation is most powerfully expressed in the form of racial self-loathing. Many of the characters have internalized the effects of the selfsame hegemonic social and political policies and practices that brutalized them; they display not only a contempt for African features and social practices associated with black culture, but also a reverence for standards of beauty associated with whiteness.

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Furthermore, the roots of their self-disgust lie so deep, that they do not recognize them for what they are. Instead, they project those feelings upon the most vulnerable members of their community, in this case the young Pecola. By the end of the novel, she has been destroyed not only by her rape at the hands of her father, but by the abuse that members of her community heap upon her.

In her "Afterword," published in 1993, Morrison describes the moment from her childhood out of which the novel grew. When an elementary school friend expressed a desire for blue eyes, the young Morrison feigned sympathy, but was actually "violently repelled" by the mere idea of the radical alteration of her friend's appearance: "very blue eyes in a very black skin."[1] She recalls that when she heard her friend's wish, she realized for the first time that "Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could *do*" (p. 209). Years later, she still wondered about "the gaze that had condemned" (p. 211) her friend and that her friend had subsequently internalized. *The Bluest Eye* offers a poignant and distilled exploration of the impact of dominant standards of beauty upon those who fall short of those cultural norms. By examining the pernicious effects of racial self-loathing upon the characters, the novel reveals ways in which African American communities are implicated in the valorization and circulation of these aesthetic ideals and the qualities they have come to symbolize.

The novel actually begins three times, a harbinger of the multiplicity of perspectives from which it is told. Before the narrative actually starts, the book opens with an excerpt from a Dick and Jane primer, one of a series of Basic Readers published by Scott, Foresman and Company from 1930 until the late 1960s. These primers both taught generations of children to read through the introduction and repetition of simple words, and also established as normative an idealized vision of a suburban, nuclear, middle-class white family. The second beginning, in italics, is told from the perspective of the adult Claudia. It identifies the year when the events of the novel occurred, mentions Pecola's tragic circumstances, and introduces some of its dominant metaphors, such as seeds and earth. The third beginning, told from Claudia's childhood perspective, actually launches the narrative.

The excerpt from the primer reads as follows:

> 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. (p. iii)

This excerpt is repeated twice; the first time with no punctuation, no capitalization except for the initial "H," and with the lines spaced closer together. The second time, all the words are run together, and the space between lines has been decreased even further.

The transformation of the passage from a familiar text to the frenzied rush of letters serves multiple functions. First, the excerpt establishes the standard against which Morrison's characters are measured, measure themselves, and are found lacking. Second, it prompts readers to take notice of a passage so familiar that one might overlook it. With neither punctuation, spaces between words, nor capitalization, the passage teeters on the brink of meaninglessness, and the standard of value it articulates and circulates is exposed as arbitrary. And third, the concatenation of letters in the second repetition anticipates the action of the novel, since many of the touchstones of the passage factor into Pecola's traumatic decline: the house, the family, the cat, the dog, the friend. Read in light of her own family circumstances, as well as her encounters with Maureen Peal, Junior, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church, the repetition of the word "play" becomes more than a way of introducing a new vocabulary word. Here it imitates the relentless pressure Pecola feels from standards of value she will never attain. Indeed, the final version is emblematic of Pecola's psychological deterioration; by the end of the novel she is shattered by her own sense of shame and by the self-loathing that others project upon her.

Although *The Bluest Eye* centers on Pecola, Morrison chose not to tell the story from her point of view because, as she writes: "the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" (p. 211). Moreover, by expanding her focus to encompass an entire community,

Morrison ensures that her reader will understand that Pecola's story is far from idiosyncratic. Not only are there three narrators – Claudia MacTeer as both an adult and a child as well as an omniscient narrator – but the text also includes the backstory of the children and adults who have a hand in Pecola's psychological wounding and who are wounded themselves. In projecting their internalized self-loathing onto a child, they exemplify how "the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society" (p. 210).

The structure of *The Bluest Eye* underscores the proliferation of stories and of narrative voices within the novel. The body of the text is divided into four chapters (each named for a different season of the year) that are, in turn, subdivided. Each chapter begins with an episode, usually involving Pecola, told from the point of view of Claudia the child but shaped by her adult reflections and rhetoric. Claudia's accounts are then followed by one or two stories told by an apparently objective, omniscient narrator. This narrator usually recalls information to which Claudia would not have had access: she tells stories from Pecola's life that involve other characters and weaves flashbacks from these other lives into Pecola's story. In addition, in each chapter, several garbled lines from the primer separate Claudia's voice from the omniscient narrator's and foreshadow the tensions contained within the story that follows.

The chapters juxtapose the 1940s, the eternal present of the primer, and the 1960s. The different narratives and moments in each chapter provide variations on a particular theme; these stories address indirectly the consequences of desiring qualities and possessions that will always be unattainable. By using this technique of repetition with a difference, Morrison reveals the interconnectedness of human lives and the inextricability of past and present. The structure of the novel suggests that readers must place Pecola's story within the context of systemic social practices and beliefs in order to comprehend it.

Claudia MacTeer is strong and self-assertive. Her household comprises a nuclear family that includes her parents, her sister Frieda, and herself, and yet it, too, departs from the hegemonic norm described in the primer: their house is old and cold, not white and green. The MacTeers share the home with roaches, mice, and briefly with a predatory boarder, not with a cat and dog. Unlike the mother in the primer, Mrs. MacTeer does not laugh much. She is a quick-tempered woman

who does not mince words when she confronts either a large or small offense. But Claudia recalls the healing presence of her family during a childhood illness: her sister sang a sentimental song to comfort her, and her mother forced her to swallow Vicks salve and massaged the ointment into her chest to help her breathe. From her adult perspective, Claudia appreciates these gestures. She looks back on her childhood and sees that while her experience may not have conformed to the Dick and Jane ideal, she was surrounded by love:

> Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it – taste it – sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base – everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. And in the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded into the room, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die. (p. 12)

This passage exemplifies the power of memory to render space symbolic, and the power of narrative to resist hegemonic norms. Through Claudia's eyes, the love that surrounded her transformed the material deprivations of her childhood home into expressions of comfort and security. Her home may have failed to live up to the ideal presented in the primer, but it comes to life in the form of cold wind seeping through a cracked window, the smell of Vicks salve, the sensation of a hot flannel cloth on her neck and chest.

During the fall of 1940 when the novel begins, Pecola and her family are temporarily homeless because Cholly, the alcoholic father, has accidentally set their house afire. Until the family can find a new place to live, the County places Pecola with the MacTeers. Claudia is too young to worship the ideal of beauty that white dolls and little white girls embody and that so many of the black people around her adore. But she is old enough to sense the power they wield over not only Frieda and Pecola, but over the adults in her community as well. Indeed, the seeds of Claudia's power as a narrator are evident in her childhood behavior and preferences. She disdains the white dolls that adults and older girls worship and expect her to value and believes that they have usurped the adoration that rightfully belongs to her.

Instead of treasuring these symbols of white femininity, Claudia takes them apart in hopes of uncovering the mystery of their power.

The MacTeers may fail to fulfill mainstream ideals of a happy family, and they may succumb to the worship of white beauty, but they are able to create an undeniably loving home for their children. In contrast, Pecola's parents, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, carry deep wounds from their earlier lives, and they take out their frustrations on their children and on each other. Born and raised in Alabama, Pauline found "the end of her lovely beginning" at the age of two, when she stepped on a rusty nail; the wound festered, leaving her with a damaged foot and a limp. To her mind, this deformity explains why she alone lacks a nickname (even her own children call her "Mrs. Breedlove"); why there are no stories about her to secure her place in family memories; and "why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace" (p. 111). Without a place in the family's oral lore, she found comfort in quiet and solitude, and especially in organizing her own possessions and those of her employers.

She meets Cholly after her family migrates to Kentucky, and he initially fulfills her fantasies for a rich intimate and romantic life. But after they move to Ohio, their marriage deteriorates, at least in part, because of her inability to find and establish community and friendships in the north. A child of the segregated south, she is unaccustomed to living in close proximity to whites, of whom she is afraid. Moreover, other black women scorn her country ways, and Cholly comes to resent her emotional dependency and her financial demands on him. Out of frustration, he turns to drink, and their quarrels grow increasingly violent.

Eventually, Pauline can only satisfy her fantasies of romantic love by imagining herself inside the Hollywood world of make-believe order and beauty. Ironically, she confronts the hollowness of her dream and the disjuncture between her fantasies and her lived experience in a movie theater. Watching a Jean Harlow film, her hair styled like Harlow's, she bites into a piece of candy and accidentally extracts a tooth. The loss of her rotten tooth awakens her to the depths of her own despair; from that moment on, she lets everything go – her appearance as well as her housekeeping – and embraces what she believes to be her own ugliness. Finding solace only in her devotion to respectability, she dedicates herself to a church "where shouting is frowned upon (p. 126)," and to maintaining the home of the Fishers,

the prosperous white family for whom she works. With the Fishers she can throw herself into her love of order; there she finds beauty, fastidiousness, and approbation. With them, she even finds her only nickname, "Polly."

Pauline's self-contempt is powerfully in evidence during the scene in which Pecola and the MacTeer sisters stop by to see her at the Fishers'. When Pecola accidentally spills a freshly baked deep-dish berry cobbler all over the floor her mother has just cleaned, scalding her bare legs with the hot juice, Mrs. Breedlove slaps her repeatedly; her tirade makes clear that the floor and the little white Fisher girl are more important to her than her own daughter. She speaks to Pecola with words Claudia describes as "hotter and darker than the smoking berries," but as she comforts the Fisher girl, "the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake" (p. 109).

Cholly is likewise trapped in his traumatic past; unable to make peace with his own suffering, he destroys his own life and the lives of those around him. As a child he was abandoned by his parents but raised by his loving Great Aunt Jimmy in Georgia. His downward spiral begins during his adolescence; on the day of Aunt Jimmy's funeral, grief, sex, and racial violence converge. Numbed and confused by the loss of his aunt, Cholly leaves the family gathering after the burial with some of his teenaged cousins to wander in the woods. When he is about to lose his virginity with his cousin Darlene, two white hunters discover them. Turning Cholly's and Darlene's sex play into blood sport, they hold the teenagers at gunpoint; the men leave when they realize that Cholly and Darlene are too humiliated to reach their climax.

In the days to come, Cholly finds that he cannot hate the white hunters. Instead, he directs his hatred toward Darlene, the witness to his humiliation and the person he failed to protect. He goes to Macon in search of the father who had abandoned him only to be harshly rebuffed. Only then does he realize how deeply he misses Aunt Jimmy. While she was alive, he did not know how to respond to her physicality and was often repelled by the smell and appearance of her aging body. But alone on the streets of Macon, when he remembers the very things that he had once found disgusting – her asafetida bag, gold teeth, purple head rag, crooked fingers – he is overcome with grief, for those very characteristics and possessions remind him of what he lost when she died.

Cholly's upbringing failed to prepare him for the responsibilities of family life. The sight of Pecola scratching the back of her calf with her toe reminds him of the way Pauline stood the first time he saw her. The structure of the narrative suggests that because of his past deprivations, he does not know what to make of his daughter's vulnerability. The only response available to him is sexual, and thus, in his drunken stupor, he rapes her.

As the adult Claudia explains, black people relegated to a marginal position in Jim Crow culture were hungry for home ownership and prided themselves excessively on maintaining their surroundings. Renters like the Breedloves occupied a lower position on the social hierarchy than owners. And those like Cholly, who through their personal weaknesses lose even the homes they rent, placing their families "outdoors," have positioned themselves "beyond the reaches of human consideration" (p. 18).

Indeed, the home the Breedloves rent expresses the traumatic environment within the family. They live in a building designed to be a storefront, a retail establishment that has been barely repurposed to serve as a residence. By the 1960s, their former home has become a store; before that it was a pizza parlor where young men congregated; before that the building was a Hungarian bakery; and before that a family of gypsies used it as "a base of operations" (p. 34). Before that, the Breedloves lived there. Each subsequent use of the property on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain is steeped in local lore – the young men congregated there; the Hungarian baker was famous for his pastries; and the girls in the gypsy family, clad in their elaborate dresses, hid "the nakedness . . . in their eyes"(p. 34). In contrast to these vivid accounts preserved in the folklore of the community, the Breedloves have left a minimal impact. The "realtor's whim" in which they live lacks private spaces and contains rooms that do not serve the purpose for which they were designed. Their furniture is randomly distributed, and no one has privacy. Worse, the furniture lacks any of the positive associations that animate personal possessions in memory and the imagination. Any associations the furniture does carry are negative, reminders of shameful transactions or encounters that permeate the space.

Pecola lives in a brutal environment, but she possesses a rich inner life and astute powers of perception that have the power to buoy her spirit. For instance, she displays a glimmer of confidence and pride

when she admires the dandelions and cracks in the sidewalk she sees on her way to Yacobowski's store to buy candy. But on her way home from the store, after she has been humiliated by the contemptuous way Yacobowski treats her, she can only see in the dandelions and the crack in the sidewalk an image of the ugliness she believes others see when they look at her. It would be better if she were angry, for anger presumes "an awareness of worth" (p. 50). But instead, she feels shame, for she has internalized the contempt that others feel for her. On the verge of tears, she gets no comfort from her identification with the dandelions and the cracks – she can now only see them as others perceive them – as weeds and defects. Instead, she soothes herself with the candy she has bought – Mary Janes, a sticky sweet candy named for the little blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl whose image appears on the wrapper.

Pecola fetishizes blue eyes because for her, they are both a window into "a world of clean comfort" (p. 50), and an emblem of unattainable beauty. Just as she drank vast quantities of milk out of the Shirley Temple cup at the MacTeers' home in hopes of becoming Shirley Temple, so too does she consume the candy in hopes that she can escape her own body, her own life, and become Mary Jane. Indeed, when her parents fight, Pecola prays to disappear; through the power of her imagination, she feels her body parts disappearing, except for her eyes. Since she cannot make her eyes disappear, she cannot eliminate her power of visual perception and thus she cannot believe herself to be invisible. She has come to believe that if her eyes were beautiful, then she would be different, and so she prays for blue eyes.

The second chapter of the novel, "Winter," exemplifies the way Morrison connects structure and content. At the beginning of "Winter," Claudia recalls the images of security that she and her family associate with the season. Her memories invoke the presence of her father and the home remedies that kept the threat of cold away. The events Claudia and the omniscient narrator describe in this chapter remind us of "pneumonia weather" (as it is called in the vernacular) – warmth that turns abruptly cold. Claudia describes a day on which she is doubly disappointed; the omniscient narrator describes how Pecola is wounded by a woman she longs to become.

Their triumph over a gang of bullies briefly binds the MacTeer sisters, Pecola, and Maureen Peal together. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer usually scorn Maureen, "the high-yellow dream child with long brown

hair"(p. 62), but the three of them join forces to protect Pecola from a group of boys who tease her about her dark skin and taunt her about her father's sleeping habits. As the narrator observes, the qualities the boys mock in Pecola are the ones of which they are ashamed in their own lives. Indeed, their insults are one of many examples of the kind of scapegoating to which Pecola is subjected in her community, where people project their self-hatred onto her.

The MacTeers' friendship with Maureen turns out to be short-lived; companionability quickly gives way to jealousy, and the girls begin to fight with each other. The MacTeer sisters cannot forgive Maureen the possessions and characteristics they envy: her wealth, long hair, and fair skin. Her conversation reflects her self-absorption and sense of entitlement and makes them uncomfortably aware of their own proximity to Pecola's condition of deprivation. When they lash out at Maureen, she resorts to the most powerful weapon in her arsenal, her disgust for their dark skin: "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (p. 73).

When the MacTeer girls arrive home that afternoon, they find momentary consolation from their parents' boarder, Mr. Henry, who is all too ready to cheer them with money for candy and ice cream. For the second time that day their delight turns to sadness, however, for they discover that Mr. Henry has sent them off not out of generosity but out of self-interest: he wants to be free to entertain a pair of prostitutes known as China and the Maginot Line. They thus become unwitting partners in maintaining a sexual secret, one that haunts them later when Mr. Henry molests Frieda. Their betrayal by both Maureen and Mr. Henry reveals how vulnerable they are outside of the safety of their immediate family.

This chapter concludes with the omniscient narrator's account of Pecola's interaction with Junior, one of her black middle-class schoolmates, and his mother, Geraldine. Pecola's encounter with Junior and Geraldine, like her relationship with her own parents, provides a window into the roots of racial self-loathing. Geraldine is part of a wave of upwardly mobile black women who migrated to the north in search of a better life. On the one hand, these women carry a deep love for their past; they "soak up the juice of their home towns and it never leaves them" (p. 81). But on the other hand, in their quest for respectability, they seek to eradicate from their lives many of the qualities they associate with that past, what the narrator calls "the dreadful

funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (p. 83). Obsessed with order, discipline, and cleanliness, Geraldine epitomizes this type of woman. She loves and receives more comfort from her cat than she does either her husband or son, and she associates poor, dark-skinned black children with the "funk" she so desperately needs to escape.

Junior senses that his mother prefers the cat to him; unable to express his anger at her, he directs his rage toward the cat and toward other children. Under the guise of inviting her to play with his cat, he invites Pecola to his home while his mother is out. Awed by the beauty and order of his home, she is caught off guard when Junior shuts her in a room and then tortures (and possibly kills) the cat. When Geraldine returns to find her cat injured, and a dirty, disheveled Pecola in her house, she looks at the child and sees only the markers of impoverished black life she has so energetically sought to escape: the cheap, dirty torn clothing, uncombed hair remind her of the unkempt girls and women of Mobile.

Like Maureen and Mr. Henry, Geraldine represents a false spring. As a young girl in the South, Geraldine was raised to be meticulous, religious, sexless, and unemotional. She is described as if she were a type, not an individual, in order to emphasize the extent of her assimilation; she is so thoroughly socialized and commodified that nothing special or unique about her remains.

The ensuing flashback from Geraldine's point of view explains the vehemence with which she ejects Pecola from her house. Geraldine's adulthood has been a slow process of eradicating "the funk," the disorder and sensory assault she associates with blackness. In Pecola's face she confronts the image of all she has tried to escape and feels as if her private territory has been invaded.

An excerpt from the garbled version of the primer separates Claudia's story from that of the omniscient narrator. Here, as in each of the chapters, these lines comment ironically on the content of the chapter. In "Winter" we read: "SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOWCOMEAND PLAYCOMEPLAYWITHJANETHEKITTENWILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLA." The correctly punctuated version of these lines might evoke the cliché of the coy household cat too finicky to play. But the scenario at Geraldine's house to which the lines refer is as jumbled as the lines are themselves. For one thing, as the narrator tells us, the cat has replaced both Geraldine's husband and her son in her affections.

Moreover, the cat is central to the episode the chapter describes. Junior lures Pecola into his house by promising to let her play with his cat. He tortures and perhaps kills the cat when he finds that it and Pecola are drawn to each other. So if Geraldine's cat will not play, it may well be because it is dead.

This chapter thus shows some of the forms that overinvestment in an alien cultural standard may take. Like Pecola, Maureen and Geraldine yearn to be white. Pecola's aspirations are entirely unattainable, since they take the form of a desire for blue eyes. Maureen and Geraldine aspire to intermediate goals that are more easily accessible. But their desires spring from a hatred of what they are that is as profound as Pecola's. By juxtaposing these and other stories to Pecola's, Morrison displays the dimensions of her protagonist's condition.

Soaphead Church, the misanthrope, is the extreme expression of this tendency toward self-loathing. He is introduced as "an old man who loved things, for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea" (p. 164). Repelled by the possibility of contact with other people, except little girls, he yearns instead for objects that humans have touched.

Soaphead comes by his racial self-loathing naturally. He is descended from a line of people who marry others of mixed racial parentage in order to distance themselves from their African origins. In Lorain he can be both part of and separate from the rest of the community by serving as a "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." It is thus no surprise that once she becomes pregnant, Pecola visits him to request blue eyes. He sees in her an "ugly little girl" who "wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (p. 174). Instead of helping her, he tricks her into killing his landlady's elderly dog, thus sending her further into madness. This chapter ends with Soaphead's letter to God in which, as John N. Duvall argues, he reveals a modicum of transformation and self-awareness:

> However arrogant and unbalanced he may be, in the act of writing, Church has made a minimal movement from consciousness to self-consciousness; witnessing Pecola's felt revelation serves as Church's own revelatory moment inasmuch as it takes him from a position of nonimplication (his belief that his life allows him to be a witness to 'human stupidity without sharing it or being compromised by it') to one that recognizes his implication.[2]

For all his perversity, Soaphead is insightful. He anticipates the view of the community at which Claudia arrives at the end of the novel when he describes the people he knew back home in the Caribbean:

> We in this colony took as our own the most dramatic, and the most obvious, of our white masters' characteristics, which were, of course, their worst. On retaining the identity of our race, we held fast to those characteristics most gratifying to sustain and least troublesome to maintain. Consequently we were not royal but snobbish, not aristocratic but class-conscious; we believed authority was cruelty to our inferiors, and education was being at school. We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom. We raised our children and reared our crops; we let infants grow, and property develop. Our manhood was defined by acquisitions. Our womanhood by acquiescence. And the smell of your fruit and the labor of your days we abhorred. (p. 177)

By the end of the novel, Pecola has suffered a mental breakdown as a result of the trauma she has experienced. In the penultimate section of the book, she is engaged in an intense conversation with someone she calls a friend. But the "friend" to whom she is speaking is her alter ego; we can tell from their exchange that she believes that she now has blue eyes, and that all she wants to do is to admire them in the mirror. We also learn that since Soaphead gave her her blue eyes, no one will meet her gaze.

The adult Claudia remembers Pecola wandering the streets, flailing her arms like a grotesque and wounded bird unable to fly. Claudia rightly realizes that the entire community had failed her. Pecola has not gone mad because of the rape and Soaphead's deception alone. The scapegoating that has played such an instrumental role in the cycle of racial self-loathing has also contributed to her destruction. In language that recalls Soaphead Church's letter to God, Claudia recognizes the hollowness of the community's pantomime of virtue. So thoroughly damaged by the racist regime whose values they have internalized, they are able only to perform the weaker version of the attributes to which they aspire:

> . . . we were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like

> thieves from life. We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word. (p. 206)

Sula

Morrison's second novel, *Sula*, confounds binary oppositions. As Deborah E. McDowell has observed, in reading this work, "We enter a new world . . . a world where we never get to the 'bottom' of things, a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions."[3] Indeed, throughout the text, Morrison interrogates the ground upon which individual and collective identities are constructed.

Sula is divided into two sections and then subdivided into chapters entitled by dates ranging from 1919 to 1965. It opens with a prologue narrated from the point of view of the present which tells the story of its setting, a community called the Bottom. The narrator establishes that the novel takes place during a moment in the life of the town when it was animated by black people's music, stories, dance, and rituals. But like many municipalities across the country, Medallion, Ohio (the fictional town within which the Bottom is located) was transformed by urban renewal, part of a national effort during the 1950s through the 1970s to improve so-called blighted areas of cities and towns.[4] Places such as the Time and a Half Pool Hall, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, and Reba's Grill were leveled to make room for the Medallion Golf Course and the suburbs. *Sula* is thus situated in a place of change and loss. Here the interests of working African American men and women have been displaced in favor of the creation of white leisure cultural spaces.[5]

The narrator goes on to describe the way in which the Bottom, the ironically named community, received its name. In her words, the story is "a nigger joke."[6] A white farmer promised his slave freedom and a piece of bottomland in exchange for performing some laborious tasks. When the time came for the farmer to make good on his word, he tricked the slave into believing that the term "bottomland" actually referred to land in the hills. That land may be high up from a human perspective, the farmer says, but from God's point of view, it is "the bottom of heaven" (p. 5). As it turns out, the land in The Bottom may

have been more difficult to farm, but it really was quite beautiful; so much so, in fact, that some people were left to wonder if it really is the bottom of heaven.

As a tale that white people tell about black people and blacks tell about themselves, the story comments upon exploitative labor practices, the violation of property rights, and the strategies of resistance that historically have inflected African American lives. It suggests how blacks have made meaning from practices that seek to disenfranchise and oppress them. Indeed, it anticipates an observation that Morrison makes in an interview with Bessie W. Jones about the relationship between irony as a strategy of resistance in her work:

> Any irony is the mainstay [for black people]. Other people call it humor. It's not really that. It's not sort of laughing away one's troubles. And laughter itself for black people has nothing to do with what's funny at all. And taking that which is peripheral, or violent or doomed or something that nobody else can see any value in and making value out of it or having a psychological attitude about duress is part of what made us stay alive and fairly coherent, and irony is a part of that – being able to see the underside of something, as well.[7]

In addition to emphasizing the place of irony in African American cultural life, this account of the genesis of The Bottom introduces the issue of the instability of meanings that is central to the text as a whole. Indeed, this idea connects the opening description to the story of Shadrack, the shell-shocked World War I veteran, that immediately follows it. Shadrack's mental instability results from his battlefield experience when, surrounded by the sudden eruption of shellfire and explosions, he witnessed the death of one of his fellow soldiers. Wounded himself, he regains consciousness in a hospital bed, but the trauma of this unanticipated devastation both defamiliarizes his own body and its movement through space and impedes his ability to connect words to their meanings. When he reaches for food, for example, his fingers seem to take on a life of their own and grow out of proportion. And when his nurse calls him "private," he wonders why the man refers to him as something secret. After Shadrack returns to Medallion, he is only able to conquer his fear by creating National Suicide Day; devoting the third day of each year to death, he tells the townspeople that "this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other" (p. 14). By relegating death to one day a year, he hopes to avert

the power of the unexpected and keep himself and everyone else safe the rest of the time.

The relationship between Shadrack's story and the rest of the novel is not immediately evident. Indeed, the title character does not appear in the novel until the second third of the book. That her story is deferred until the reader is introduced to the town, to Shadrack, to her best friend Nel and Nel's family, as well as to Sula's own family, suggests that like Pecola's story, Sula's is at once individual and collective, part of the fabric of the communal lore of The Bottom.

Like several of Morrison's novels, *Sula* focuses on a cluster of black women characters.[8] Nel and Sula, the central figures, are complementary opposites. The daughter of Wiley Wright, a cook on one of the Great Lakes ships and his beautiful, respectable wife Helene, Nel is the product of a restrained and conservative black middle-class background. She glimpses the vulnerability beneath her mother's composed veneer during their trip to New Orleans after her great grandmother, Cecile Sabat, falls ill. Not only are she and her mother subjected to the indignities of transportation on a segregated train car – an alien experience to a child reared in the north – but Nel shares the disdain of her fellow black passengers when she witnesses her ordinarily dignified mother smile obsequiously at the conductor who upbraids them when he sees them in the whites-only car. When they arrive in New Orleans, they discover that Cecile has already passed away, but in her house they encounter her daughter and Helene's mother, the prostitute Rochelle. Delicate, sweet-smelling, and dressed in a canary yellow dress, Rochelle is the antithesis of her daughter; barely masking her contempt, Helene describes her as "much handled" (p. 27). Nel's experiences on this trip undermine the certainties of her life and awaken in her a sense of her unique identity. Although she never travels outside of Medallion again, the journey expands her sense of possibilities and prepares her for her transformative friendship with Sula.

In contrast to Nel, Sula is the product of a more iconoclastic and adventurous household. Her grandmother, the one-legged matriarch Eva Peace, presides over an idiosyncratically and improvisationally constructed home populated by a motley assortment of "children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders" (p. 30). After her marriage to a man named BoyBoy dissolves, Eva is left alone to raise her three children: Hannah, Eva (called Pearl), and her son Plum.

Unable to support her children on her own, she leaves them in the care of a neighbor; she returns 18 months later with one leg and sufficient means to build a new house and care for her family, fueling rumors that she has sacrificed her limb in exchange for a substantial insurance settlement.

If Nel Wright is known for her respectability, Eva's nonconformity is legendary. She provides a home for the lost, such as Tar Baby, a man reputed to be white with a penchant for alcohol but blessed "with the sweetest hill voice imaginable" (p. 40), and the deweys, three abandoned children she takes in and upon whom she bestows the name Dewey King. She and her daughter Hannah share a quality the narrator refers to as "manlove." Eva does not maintain an active sexual life, but she has many gentleman callers. Hannah, in contrast, sleeps with as many men as she can in order to satisfy her need to be touched every day.

Eva expresses maternal love in ways that are powerful, often violent. She throws herself from a second-story window in a futile effort to smother the flames that consume her daughter Hannah. In a novel replete with wounded male figures – Shadrack, Tar Baby, the perpetually childlike deweys – she saves Plum twice in especially harrowing ways. First, when he was a child, she pulled rock-hard excrement from his anus. The second time takes place after he returns home from the war with a cocaine addiction; despite Eva's best efforts, he is unable to break out of his self-destructive behavior. Powerless to save her son from himself, Eva decides that the only way she can rescue him is to take his life, so she burns him alive.

Heir to this maternal legacy, Sula is more iconoclastic than Nel. Early in their friendship, the two enjoy an intense, almost erotic closeness. As the narrator remarks:

> Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (p. 52)

As lonely preadolescents, each finds in the other what she lacks in order to become fully herself. Moreover, their friendship provides each girl with the comfort she requires in order to begin to understand her sexuality; in each other's company, they brave and secretly enjoy the appraising eyes of the men who congregate on Carpenter's Road.

The novel thus ostensibly revolves around a set of binary oppositions: Shadrach's madness versus the sanity of the ordinary townspeople, and the outlaw Sula versus the more respectable Nel. As events unfold, however, these contrasts seem less distinct than they initially appear. The townspeople may think that the ritual of National Suicide Day is a mark of Shadrack's insanity, but they have comparable ways of shielding themselves from the unpredictability of evil and loss. Likewise, for all their differences, Nel and Sula need each other to develop into maturity and individuality. Indeed, Nel may seem to be an innocent witness to Sula's extreme behavior – especially the drowning of Chicken Little. But by the end of the novel she is forced to acknowledge that spectatorship is not an innocent activity, and to recognize that she derived some pleasure from watching the surface of the water close over his body.

Sula's and Nel's relationship consolidates even more fully after the drowning death of Chicken Little. Their experience both binds them together with a shared secret and also problematizes the connections between looking and doing and between innocence and guilt. The events leading up to the death of Chicken Little are juxtaposed with, and might even be the indirect result of, Sula's overhearing her mother tell a friend that while she loves Sula, she does not like her. The narrator suggests a connection between these two incidents later on when she remarks that "the first experience taught her there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either" (pp. 118–119).

Shortly after Sula hears her mother's conversation, she and Nel run to the riverbank. Silently, they begin to play in the grass: each girl strokes blades of grass and then digs a hole in the dirt with a stick. After the two holes become one, they fill it with their sticks and other bits of debris, and cover it with soil and the grass they have uprooted, burying it all in a makeshift grave. Some critics have interpreted this scene as a displacement of the girls' sexual energy, a ritualized burial of their attraction to one another.[9] One might also read the scene as a pantomime of the death of childhood innocence brought about by the conversation that Sula overhears. Either way, this scene is part of a pivotal moment in the girls' personal development, for it leads to their accidental drowning of Chicken Little. What began as an innocent childhood game – swinging the young boy out over the water – turns deadly when Sula loses her grip on him and he sinks into

the river. The girls are stunned both by the fact that in an instant they have taken a life, and by the possibility that someone – namely Shadrack – might have seen them do it. The novel never confirms whether he saw the death of Chicken Little; when he and Sula encounter each other immediately after the drowning, he speaks only one word to her: "Always." She and Nel understand him to mean that he did, in fact, witness the death and that he – and by extension they – will never forget it. But by the end of the novel we learn that he says the word "Always" because it is the only word of comfort he knows to offer to an obviously distressed child. From his own traumatic past experience, he knows only to try to reassure her that she need not fear catastrophic change.

This episode is also significant because it calls into question the distinction between guilt and innocence. At first glimpse it seems obvious that Sula is responsible for Chicken Little's death and that Nel is merely an innocent bystander. However, when Chicken Little disappears under the surface of the water, Nel's first concern is whether "someone saw." Because she is complicit in keeping the cause of his death a secret, her behavior raises the issue of her culpability.

The issue of the ethics of spectatorship also emerges around Hannah's accidental death by fire. Having risked her own life to keep Hannah from burning alive, Eva watches Sula stand by and watch her mother burn, "not because she was paralyzed with fear, but because she was interested" (p. 78). As was the case with Nel and the death of Chicken Little, this episode does not suggest that Sula is responsible for her mother's death; however, it does raise questions about the role of the witness as viewer of another person's suffering or death. Much later in the novel, when Nel visits her in the nursing home, Eva accuses her of throwing Chicken Little in the water. When Nel denies her responsibility and blames Sula, Eva says simply: "You. Sula. What's the difference? You was there. You watched, didn't you? Me, I never would've watched" (p. 168). Not only does Eva deny the distinction between Nel and Sula, but she also denies that watching and doing are substantively different.

Part One of the novel concludes with Nel's marriage to Jude Greene. The wedding is the culmination of Helene Wright's dreams and desires for her daughter; the lavish display also makes it a major event in the life of Medallion. Furthermore, the marriage provides Nel with a source of fulfillment, for at least temporarily it gives her life a purpose.

Although initially she was not especially eager to marry, she was all too ready to assume her role within the racialized patriarchal order once she realized that Jude needed her to help him compensate for the assault that structural racism had perpetrated upon his masculinity. Jude had hoped to be hired to help build the New River Road as part of a wave of prosperity that followed World War I. But the construction company has no place for strong, young black men, only hiring elderly black men to clean, serve food, and run errands. Jude decides, therefore, that he needs a wife to provide him with consolation and comfort. If the world of work will not make him feel like a man, then he expects that being head of his household will do so.

Part Two of the novel begins 10 years after the wedding, with Sula's return in 1937. Her time away has heightened her spirit of rebelliousness. She re-enters her grandmother's house in defiance; within months she has Eva committed to a nursing home for elderly black women. At first, Nel is delighted to have Sula back in her life; for Nel, seeing her again "was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed" (p. 95). But Sula's disregard for social norms knows no bounds. She sleeps with Jude for no reason other than that he "filled up the space" (p. 144), thereby destroying her friendship with Nel as well as Nel's marriage. Indeed, she seeks to live outside the restraints of prevailing social norms, especially as they are constructed for women:

> Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her and, with a twist that was all her own imagination, she lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full rein, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life – ever since her mother's remarks sent her flying up those stairs, ever since her one major feeling of responsibility had been exercised on the bank of a river with a closed place in the middle. (p. 118)

Sula's outlaw behavior, which includes sleeping with and discarding the men of Medallion notwithstanding their marital status, actually creates an important role for her within the town. Medallion's black residents view Sula as the source of evil in their world; her presence gives them a way of creating order out of the chaos and random difficulties of their lives.[10] Viewing her as the repository of evil in their

lives, they are able to hold themselves to a higher standard of morality. As the narrator observes:

> Once the source of their personal misfortune was identified, they had leave to protect and love one another. They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst. (p. 117)

Sula may appear to flout the conventions of her society, but in her relationship with Ajax, she too falls prey to the possessiveness commonly associated with heterosexual romantic love. Despite her efforts to improvise a life, she cannot avoid slipping into the roles women traditionally perform in monogamous relationships. This slide into predictability drives Ajax away; and just a few years later she succumbs to a fatal illness. Years after Sula's death, Nel realizes that the sense of longing she has felt since Jude's departure is really a response to losing Sula.

In her first two novels, then, Morrison holds racialized and gendered cultural norms up to scrutiny. In *The Bluest Eye*, she explores processes through which the pursuit of idealized standards of beauty leads to self-loathing and victimizes the most vulnerable members of an already marginalized community. In *Sula*, Morrison delves more deeply into the means by which social norms are produced to interrogate the binary logic upon which they are based and from which they derive their force. The relationship between Shadrack and the town of Medallion on the one hand, and the friendship between Nel and Sula on the other hand, suggest that rather than polar opposites, notions such as madness and sanity, innocence and guilt, respectability and rebelliousness are actually mutually dependent and inextricable constructions. Societies may need to demonize "the other" in order to shore up their own systems of belief, but their very survival depends upon the existence of that "other"; distinctions between insiders and outsiders are shown to be less stable and evident than they initially appear.

Notes

1 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970; rpt. New York: Plume, 1973), pp. 209–211. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

2 John N. Duvall, *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 33.

3 Deborah E. McDowell, "'The Self and the Other': Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female Text," ed. Nellie Y. McKay, *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1988), p. 80.

4 In theory, urban renewal (often ironically called "urban removal") was intended to enhance the landscape of cities and provide displaced residents with improved housing alternatives. In practice, however, many rich and vibrant communities of color were flattened throughout the United States to make way for highways, leisure spaces, commercial enterprises, and multistory buildings. Residents, some of whom were homeowners, were either relegated to substandard public housing or forced to relocate elsewhere. Mindy Fullilove defines this process as "root shock." According to her, root shock is "the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one's emotional ecosystem." This devastation of social networks, Fullilove explains, "is a profound . . . upheaval that destroys the working model of the world that had existed in the individual's head that threatens both individual and communal identities." See *Root Shock: How Tearing Up City Neighborhoods Hurts America and What We Can Do About It* (New York: Random House, 2004), pp. 11–14.

5 Barbara Johnson writes powerfully about the Freudian echoes of Morrison's representation of home as a place that both is familiar and has never been. See her essay "'Aesthetic' and 'Rapport' in Toni Morrison's *Sula*," in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. Marc C. Conner (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000), p. 4.

6 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1973; rpt. New York: Vintage, 2004), p. 4. Subsequent references will be to this edition.

7 Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, "An Interview with Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), p. 175.

8 This is especially true of *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy*.

9 See, for example, Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek, "Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*," in *Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism*, ed. David Middleton (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 61–94. As Gillespie and Kubitschek observe: "The scene shows clearly their subconscious recognition of their femininity in their construction of the yonic symbols and their conception of themselves as one (either defined by gender or joined sexually)," p. 84.

10 Indeed, their treatment of Sula recalls Shadrack's use of National Suicide Day to protect him from evil, as well as the scapegoating of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*.