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Joyce Dorris
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JOYCE DORRIS

ENGLISH HONORS THESIS

DIRECTED BY DR. SUZANNE JONES

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"When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it's the world of black people," Toni Morrison explains. (Tate, 122). Morrison writes for and about black people. But because her fiction is specifically about a particular world, it creates understanding that can be applied universally.

Toni Morrison tackles the problems for which she does not have resolutions. In order to make an impact on readers and achieve a meaningful understanding, Morrison manipulates readers' emotions. She says, "My writing expects, demands participatory reading...The reader supplies the emotions. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience" (Tate, 125). Morrison carefully positions her readers to see what her characters see and react as they would. Morrison feels if the readers can see the person experiencing the thing, they do not need an explanation. The illustration will provide the understanding.
Morrison selects cliche themes like the concepts of beauty and ugliness, and good and evil to explore because she feels "the subjects that are important in the world, are the same ones that have always been important" (Tate, 121). In a published interview, Morrison told Claudia Tate: "I try to get underneath them (cliches) and see what they mean, understand the impact they have on what people do...The problem I face as a writer is to make my stories mean something" (121).

Morrison does not employ her calculated structure and technique for the sake of artifice, but to guide her readers so that her story will mean something. She aims to show readers how deviations happen, giving them the background then to consider why they happen.

In The Bluest Eye, eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove becomes a victim of her environment. Her experiences at home, school, and play offer her no opportunity to develop a positive concept of herself. Morrison writes to show how this happens. At the beginning of the novel, Morrison tells the reader that in 1941 Pecola was having her father's baby. She says, "There is really nothing more to say - except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (2). Morrison wants her reader to understand how this awful situation occurred. She comments on her intent in a published conversation with Claudia Tate:
I tell you at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost irrelevant because I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain. By that time his embrace, the rape, is all the gift he has left. (125).

Morrison confronts the age-old problems of incest and a lack of love by showing the environment and events that led to Pecola's current situation. In doing so, she hopes to make her reader more capable of empathy and understanding.

Toni Morrison aids readers' understanding of the environment in which Pecola is struggling to grow up by presenting three different ways of printing an excerpt from a typical elementary school primer. She firmly establishes that the picture constantly represented as the norm for families is derived solely from the white experience. The image of what life is supposed to be for Americans does not reflect the reality of life for blacks.

In a conversation with Thomas LeClair, Morrison elaborates:

In *The Bluest Eye* I used the primer story, with its picture of a happy family, as a frame acknowledging the outer civilization. The primer with white children was the way life was presented to the black people. As the novel proceeded I wanted that primer version broken and confused, which explains the typographical running together of the words. (29)

The primer passage describes a green and white house where Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live very happily. Their family has two pets, a cat, and a dog. The mother is "very nice" and the father is "big and strong." There is laughing, smiling, playing—all happiness. Morrison illustrates this is a way of life white
people accept as universal. An elementary school primer is something not usually considered racist, but Morrison shows how it recognizes only the middle-class, white family experience. The primer shapes a child's expectations of family life. This excerpt demonstrates that children's expectations are bound to reflect a limited concept of reality. As a result of examples of what is average, like the primer, in her environment, Pecola adopts a distorted view of what is valuable. She sees the white way of life as the only one that yields happiness. With this unrealistic notion of what she needs to be happy, Pecola is unable to be content with herself as she is. She cannot develop a healthy, positive self-concept because there is no model to take one from.

By presenting the primer paragraph three different ways, Morrison illustrates the three types of black families in her story and the degree to which they deviate from the white norm. The first time the primer paragraph is evenly spaced and properly punctuated. This version parallels Geraldine's family story. Geraldine tries to suppress her own blackness and achieve the appearance of the white ideal family unit. She despises the poor blacks she observed growing up in Mobile, Alabama. Geraldine carefully distinguishes "colored people" from "niggers" for her son, saying, "colored people were neat and quiet, niggers were dirty and loud" (71). Geraldine tries to fit into the white way of life described in the primer paragraph. By attempting to obtain that ideal, she denies her heritage and sets her family
apart from other blacks. One critic calls it a counterfeit of the idealized white family. (Ogunyemi, 113). Morrison is critical of this response.

Following the orderly arrangement of the words in the first paragraph, the same passage is repeated as the second paragraph but without punctuation or capitalization. The sentences run together, but the story is still discernable. This version accompanies the McTeer family story where there is a functioning family unit in a house, but where reality does not resemble the simple, carefree life depicted in the first paragraph. Claudia McTeer, the narrator, describes her family situation:

Our house is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice. Adults do not talk to us - they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. (12)

This description stands in sharp contrast to the primer depiction, "See mother, Mother is very nice. Mother will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh Mother, laugh..." (7).

The third version of the primer paragraph has no spacing or punctuation. It appears a jumbled mess. Elements of the original story can be picked out, but it looks nothing like the first paragraph. It illustrates the total breakdown of order in the Breedlove family. Repeating the passage three times with the final paragraph equal to Pecola’s family, Morrison helps the reader understand the "jumbled mess" that is Pecola’s reality. Her family situation barely resembles the concept of a family that
the primer presents. The Breedloves live in an abandoned store-front. The building is so delapidated passersby wonder why it has not been torn down, or they simply look away. Morrison describes the Breedloves' circumstances,

They slipped in and out of the box of peeling gray, making no stir in the neighborhood, no sound in the labor force, and no wave in the mayor’s office. Each member of the family in his own cell of consciousness, each making his own patchwork quilt of reality—collecting fragments of experience here, pieces of information there. From the tiny impressions gleaned from one another, they created a sense of belonging and tried to make do with the way they found each other.

Morrison juxtaposes Mother-Father-Dick-Jane with Mrs. Breedlove-Cholly-Sammy-Pecola to show the reader that what is taught to black children in school does not at all relate to the reality they face. Pecola is left to reconcile the huge incongruities between what is depicted as average and her reality. Happiness cannot be found in Pecola’s reality, she feels she has to be like those featured as the norm.

Morrison stresses that Pecola has no opportunity to develop a positive concept of herself because blacks are not represented in pictures of reality like school primers, billboards, dolls, and movies. Although Claudia rejects blue-eyed baby dolls, Pecola idolizes them. Claudia cannot understand why everyone assumes these dolls will fulfill her fondest wishes. About a hard, blue-eyed baby doll Claudia says,

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only
me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured. (20)

Pecola dreams of being like these white baby dolls. Her favorite blue-eyed little girl is Shirley Temple. While staying at the McTeers, Pecola drinks three quarts of milk just for the chance to use the Shirley Temple cup, "to handle and see sweet Shirley's face." From her idolization of these little white girls, Pecola derives her overwhelming desire to have blue eyes. Jane Bakerman writes, "Because white children appear to be beloved by both white and black adults, Pecola determines to achieve beauty and acceptance by acquiring blue eyes" (545). Blue eyes represent the beautiful, happy life Shirley Temple and the other white girls are presumed to have that Pecola does not have and cannot obtain. Morrison suggests blacks should not strive for happiness by imitating the white ideal.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (40)

Pecola feels she needs blue eyes, like the little white girls she sees, to be beautiful, but Morrison stresses that having blue eyes and beauty is not the key to being lovable.

When she feels ashamed, Pecola is comforted by eating Mary Janes because the girl pictured on the wrapper has a smiling
white face, blond hair, and "blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (43). Pecola thinks to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, and to thereby "Eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (43). Pecola loves these well-known, blue-eyed girls because she interprets them as worthy of being loved. A candy was named for the little girl, Mary Jane. Shirley Temple was in the movies and on cups. The environment Pecola lives in does not give her any evidence that she is worthy of being loved. Jane Bakerman states, "At every turn the reader is made to understand Pecola’s state is helpless" (545). Pecola’s environment does not confirm anything of value in herself.

The feelings of ugliness and inadequacy that prevent Pecola from forming a healthy self-concept derive not only from her environment, but from her family as well. Morrison shows her reader that Pecola’s family takes its perception of itself as ugly ultimately from the environment which does not incorporate the black population. The Breedloves believe they are ugly people. White society has established a standard of beauty that reflects white characteristics; consequently, blacks who may not even realize they cannot live up to the ideal, feel ugly and unacceptable. Morrison’s description of the Breedloves’ perspective shows their distorted perception:

No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family - Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove and Pecola Breedlove - wore their ugliness, put it on so to speak, although it
did not belong to them .... 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 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. (34)

The Breedloves accept that they are ugly because the most available standard they have to measure themselves by is imposed by a white world. Naturally they fall far short of the white standard; it does not reflect black life. The Breedloves should not have to achieve a white standard of living in order to be accepted; however, that is the only norm that society values. It is the view that shapes everyone's idea of what is desirable.

Mrs. Breedlove has been influenced by what she has learned of physical beauty and romantic love at the movies: "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (97). At the movies she saw white men taking good care of their wives, big clean houses that had bathtubs in the same room as the toilet, and beautiful people dressed in nice clothes.

Mrs. Breedlove reflects, "Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard" (97). When she was five months pregnant, Mrs. Breedlove fixed her hair like Jean Harlow's and went to see a movie featuring Harlow and Clark Gable. While taking a big bite of candy, she pulled a tooth out of her mouth.
That was a devastating experience for her since it made her efforts to look like Jean Harlow more ridiculous and impossible. Mrs. Breedlove says, "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" (98). Mrs. Breedlove realizes she will never be able to live up to the standard of beauty she learns in the movies, and this realization fills her with hopeless resignation.

Because she feels ugly and completely undesirable, she is unable to give love to the other members of her family. Mrs. Breedlove accepts the label of ugliness she derives from a white world. In that world, she cannot provide love to her husband and children who really need it; she can only love the children of the white family she works for. Mrs. Breedlove does not feel loved; therefore, she cannot feel good about herself and cannot begin to help Pecola feel good about herself. In her article "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Bakerman writes,

Her [Pecola’s] parents, Cholly and Pauline, have accepted the idea that they are ugly and in doing so have come to hate one another. Equally importantly, they do not know how to love; and they cannot give their children a sense of self, for they have none of their own. (544)

Both mother and daughter face the insurmountable problem of not favorably measuring up to the white norm to which they are constantly exposed. As a result, neither is able to build a personal sense of worth. Morrison shows Pecola’s family as one unable to
provide an environment of love, and she forces her reader to consider the environment that produced such a family.

Others are able to sense the Breedloves' low self-esteem, and they exploit their weakness. Pecola is used as a scapegoat for the anger of other children who recognize she is one who is even weaker than they. The boys at school encircle and taunt Pecola, taking out their hatred and dissatisfaction with the world on her. They shout, "Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked" (55). They insult her about matters over which she has no control, about things that could be said about their own fathers. Morrison tells the reader,

> 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. (55)

Pecola finds no strong support at home or at school. The McTeers try to help by allowing her to stay in their home while Pecola's father is in jail and her mother cannot provide for her. But even though Claudia and Frieda McTeer stand by Pecola, they cannot provide the love and positive self-image she has not received from her family or environment. They are two little girls trying to grow up themselves. They cannot save Pecola.

At the end of the novel, Pecola retreats into a world of comfortable insanity. The world she struggled to survive in was not conducive to her healthy growth and development. Morrison wants her reader to understand that little girls like Pecola are destined to fail before they begin when the vision they have of
acceptability and happiness is one they can never obtain. Pecola becomes convinced that she needs blue eyes to survive in this world. Blue eyes represent beauty judged according to a white model, the only model Pecola has been offered. Tragically, Pecola feels she has to change herself to be acceptable, but the change she thinks will save her can never happen. No one can change the color of her eyes:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach - could not even see - but which filled the valleys of the mind. (158)

Morrison allows her reader to see that Pecola Breedlove is a total victim of her environment. She makes her reader conscious of the elaborately socialized world of black people. In the last paragraph of The Bluest Eye, Morrison reminds the reader not to blame the victim because she did not survive:

This soil 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 victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. (160)

In telling this story of Pecola Breedlove, Morrison offers readers a new awareness of the confining ideals presented in the media of society. She also pushes her readers to consider the world that they create for themselves and little girls like Pecola.
Morrison makes an intentional progression from girlhood in *The Bluest Eye* to womanhood in *Sula*. She explores what the Claudias and Friedas, feisty little girls, grow up to be. Bakerman makes this comparison:

*Sula* differs from *The Bluest Eye* in both complexity and the assignment of responsibility. Here, while it is still made clear that Sula and Nel are undervalued,...both girls make specific decisions and choices which also contribute. Pecola struggles with the fate assigned to her; Sula and Nel help to choose their fates. (548)

Morrison uses the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace to challenge preconceived concepts of good and evil. Sula is a law-breaking, free-spirited character. A birthmark over her right eye that resembles a rose symbolizes the mystery that surrounds her unconventional nature. She comes from a family of all women. Living in her grandmother’s disorderly household, she learns an unusually loose concept of sexuality. Her mother, Hannah, often invites men into the pantry for an afternoon fling. Morrison says about her character Hannah: "She had no concept of love and possession. She liked to be laid, she liked to be touched, but she didn’t want any confusion of relationships and so on" (Tate, 478). Hannah doesn’t like to sleep with these men because that implies trust and commitment which she wants to avoid. Sula sees sex as "pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable" (44). Sula overhears her mother say she loves Sula but doesn’t like her. Morrison describes Hannah’s relationship with her daughter as one of uninterest. "She would do things for her, but she wasn’t particularly interested in her" (Tate, 478).
Sula has not been raised in a traditional household; therefore, she does not follow conventional behavior. The town interprets her actions as unnatural.

Nel is the opposite kind of character: conforming, predictable and responsible. Morrison characterizes the type: "I wanted Nel to be a warm, conventional woman, one of those people you know are going to pay the gas bill and take care of the children" (Stepto, 475). Her mother, Helene, is a visible, upstanding member of the community. She is always in church, and she maintains a perfect house. Nel's mother has a strict, traditional concept of right and wrong, good and evil. Helene rears her daughter accordingly. Helene directs Nel to squeeze her nose regularly so that it will become narrower and presumably more attractive. Morrison tells the reader,

Under Helene’s hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasms that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter’s imagination underground. (18)

Nel’s personality is molded into the traditional shape that is thought to best prepare a young girl for her role as a wife and mother. She is trained to be soft-spoken, comforting, cautious and responsible. Independence and originality are discouraged.

Morrison proves that good and evil can never really be defined. The stereotypes that the community assigns to Sula and Nel are inaccurate. Neither is completely evil or good. Morrison upsets almost all pre-formed judgements about characters to show her readers that people are never as simple as our preconceived
notions suggest. By writing about unusual characters, explaining how their strangeness developed, and making sense out of their oddity, Toni Morrison broadens her readers' human understanding. She demonstrates how a community can accept and be brought closer together by pariahs.

*Sula* begins with a story about National Suicide Day and its founder, Shadrack. One day a year Shadrack marches through town telling people this is their chance to kill themselves or someone else. This strange story captures the reader's interest and serves as an introductory example of the way in which Toni Morrison is going to induce understanding. She explains that every January third since 1920 Shadrack has celebrated National Suicide Day: "Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged" (7). As a man of less than twenty years, Shadrack went to war. In his first encounter with the enemy he saw the face of a soldier who was running next to him shot off and the soldier's body continue to run on. Morrison relates the incident in horrifying detail in order to shock the reader the way that Shadrack must have been shocked:

Wincing at the pain in his foot, he turned his head a little to the right and saw the face of a soldier near him fly off. Before he could register shock, the rest of the soldier’s head disappeared under the inverted soup bowl of his helmet. But stubbornly, taking no direction from the brain, the body of the headless soldier ran on, with energy and grace, ignoring altogether the drip and slide of brain tissue down its back. (8)
Immediately the reader understands why this man might have trouble readjusting to everyday life. Shadrack struggles to come to terms with this terrible experience. Morrison says that Shadrack had to make a place for his fear so that he could control it: "It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both" (14). As a result, Shadrack devotes one day every year to death so that everyone can "get it out of the way" and the rest of the year will be "safe and free." Morrison shows that Shadrack reacts in a comprehensible way to what has happened to him. His madness is organized. He is simply trying to control what really cannot be controlled. On the first National Suicide Day, Shadrack walked through town with a cowbell and a hangman's rope announcing to people that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other. At first the people of Medallion are afraid of Shadrack, but once they see that he never harms anyone and is unobtrusive the rest of the year, they accept his odd behavior: "Once the people understood the boundaries and nature of his madness, they could fit him, so to speak, into the scheme of things" (15).

With all her characters, Toni Morrison tries to generate the understanding necessary to help people fit others who are not like themselves into the human scheme of things. She praises the way the people of Medallion work National Suicide Day into their lives. One grandmother says her hens begin laying double yolks after Suicide Day; a bride-to-be makes certain her wedding is not
on Suicide Day because she does not want to hear cowbells during the ceremony.

Using the small anecdote about Shadrack, Morrison prepares the reader for her story about Nel and Sula. She hints that the reader should not accept judgements made from the way a person appears. The lines separating good and evil are not usually clear, and there are usually hidden motivations that alter our initial perceptions.

Both Nel and Sula are only children with fantasies and a desire to share. At age 12 they are bound together in friendship, each searching for an identity. They depend on one another for understanding as they struggle through adolescence. Even though they are motivated by the same feelings, Sula and Nel always respond differently in crisis situations. Ann Mickelson remarks, "Nel is calm, passive or frightened in a crisis. Sula’s emotions erupt in some action that is strong or even violent" (128).

After Nel is harassed by a group of teenage white boys on her way home from school, she avoids further confrontations by taking a much longer route home. This is an understandably passive response to a frightening situation. In contrast, Sula stands up to the boys. When they try to prevent Nel’s and her passage, Sula takes out a slate and a paring knife. She cuts off the tip of one of her fingers and tells them, "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?" (55). For a young girl, Sula displays unheard-of courage. She stands up to boys. Sula does not allow anyone to bully her. In frightening situations, Sula
is capable of unbelievable things. Her boldness and strength are unexpected of her gender. Sula acts in defense of Nel.

Morrison praises Sula's actions when she is daring or supportive, but criticizes her carelessness. When Nel and Sula find Chicken Little by the river, Nel takes on an authoritarian, mother-like approach. She tells Chicken, "Your mamma tole you to stop eatin' snot" (59). Sula tells Nel to leave him alone. She helps Chicken climb a tree. She coaxes him and watches that he does not fall. Then Sula plays with him, swinging his body outward, holding him by his hands. But she is not careful enough. He slips and flies into the river. Nel and Sula watch, expecting him to reappear, but he does not. Morrison shows that Sula's lack of fear and consideration of consequences can cause serious injury to other people. At the funeral, Nel is afraid that any minute the sheriff or reverend will come to accuse them. Nel's response reveals her respect for authority and strong sense of responsibility. Sula responds in a purely emotional way by crying; however she does not express remorse at having been responsible. She lacks a moral sense. Morrison weaves aspects of good and evil into the personalities of both Nel and Sula. She points out, "Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good—you never really know what it is. It depends on what uses you put it to" (Stepto, 476).

Nel and Sula are projections of different aspects of one character. Their friendship is so close they themselves had trouble distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's. Morrison
suggests Nel and Sula are complementary parts of one whole, complete person. In their friendship, they share in everything as if they were one. "In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, cruelty to one was a challenge to the other" (84). When Jude, a popular man in Medallion, begins showing Nel special attention, Sula is not jealous. Sula enhances the experience for Nel because she wants Nel to shine. Morrison uses their unselfish friendship to illustrate that each needs some of the qualities of the other in order to be a full, happy human being. In an interview entitled "Intimate Things in Place," Morrison told Robert Steptoe, "There was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something that the other one had" (476). Nel, suppressed by her parents, needs more of Sula's feistiness, courage, easy-goingness and independence. Sula, unrestricted by her mother and grandmother, needs more of Sula's responsibility and connectedness. Jude chooses Nel for a wife over Sula because Nel responds to his needs in the way he wants and expects. As a black man looking for "real" work he has experienced disappointment, shame and anger. He feels driven to fulfill the traditional male role in society:

So it was rage, rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down. He needed some of his appetites filled, some posture of adulthood recognized, but mostly he wanted someone to care about his hurt, to care very deeply... And if he were to be a man, that someone could no longer be his mother. He chose the girl who had always
been kind, who had never seemed hell-bent to marry, who made the whole venture seem like his idea. (82-83)

When Jude demonstrates his needs, Nel is prepared to comfort him, and she feels flattered that he asked her. She enjoys being needed by someone who sees her individually, separate from Sula. In Medallion, Marriage is the accepted and celebrated path to take after graduation from general school. Nel is assuming the role for which she has been raised. Medallion embraces Nel for her conventional behavior, but by conforming completely to the town’s expectations, she doesn’t have the opportunity to know herself. Unlike Nel at that turning point in their lives, Sula chooses to leave Medallion. Susan Parr comments, “Morrison presents the tension between the individual’s quest for independence and self-realization in a society that values conformity and offers limited opportunities for personal fulfillment” (28). Sula is the only person who brings out Nel’s uniqueness. Nel’s strictly defined role in society prevents her from knowing herself.

Ten years later, the people of Medallion interpret a throng of messy robinss as an evil omen marking Sula’s return. Sula strolls back into town in expensive clothes, flaunting that she has had an adventurous absence. After her return she is less tolerant than ever of traditional rules for behavior. One of the first actions she takes is to have her grandmother, Eva, put in a convalescent home. She says she did it because she was afraid of Eva. The black community is extremely critical of anyone who
"puts their relatives away." Morrison told Robert Stepto: "Sula did the one terrible thing for black people which was to put her grandmother in an old folks' home, which was outrageous. You take care of people". (478). Sula's decision to move her grandmother out of the house illustrates the missing ties of responsibility to others in her personality. Her free-spirited, independent nature, which gives her the power to defy convention, also leaves her somewhat self-centered and cut off from those close to her. Even Nel tells Sula that putting her grandmother in that church-run home is not right. Nel goes about trying to fix Sula's action:

The situation was clear to her now. Sula, like always, was incapable of making any but the most trivial decisions. When it came to matters of grave importance, she behaved emotionally and irresponsibly and left it to others to straighten out. And when fear struck her, she did unbelievable things. Like that time with her finger. (101)

At first, Nel feels revived by Sula's return. Sula makes her feel alive, "clever, gentle and a little raunchy" (95). Nel is less irritated by her children; she regains a sense of humor and playfulness that is even reflected in her relationship with Jude. However, she was not prepared for discovering Sula and her husband kissing while naked in her bedroom. Jude leaves Nel after that. Nel is crushed. She struggles to understand why Jude left after all they had been through together, and how Sula, her best friend, could do that to her. She is not equipped to handle such a drastic change or to comprehend how others can
ignore their responsibility to their family or friends. It seems Jude left because he knew he was wrong, and he wanted to escape his situation. Sula did it because she did not think there was anything wrong with sharing Jude. Sula did not want to take him away from Nel. It was another impulsive, emotional act where she did not consider the consequences or potential hurt to another. In a society where she has done what she was supposed to do, Nel is left estranged from the two people she ever loved and felt loved by. Sula pursues her own pleasure, but is condemned by the town as evil because she does the unacceptable:

When the word got out about Eva being put in Sunnydale, the people in the bottom shook their heads and said Sula was a roach. Later, when they saw how she took Jude, then ditched him for others, ...they forgot all about Hannah's easy ways (or their own) and said she was a bitch. Everybody remembered the plague of robins that announced her return, and the tale about her watching Hannah burn was stirred up again. But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing - the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion... They said that Sula slept with white men. (112)

Nel is labelled as good and Sula as evil. The people who hold these conceptions find evidence to support the labels. But Morrison makes the reader understand why Sula slept with Jude. She shows that Sula is an incomplete and unconventional character more than an evil one:

She had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both an other and a self, only to discover that she and Nel were not one and the same thing. She had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude. They had always shared the affection of other people...Marriage, apparently, had changed all that, but having had no intimate knowledge of marriage, having lived in a house with women who thought all men available, and selected from among them with a care
only for their tastes, she was ill prepared for the possessiveness of the one person she felt close to. (119).

In the interview with Claudia Tate, Morrison clarifies her definition of evil: "Evil is not an alien force; it's just a different force. That's the evil I was describing in Sula" (124);

Nel is equally incomplete because her personality is limited to the role society has outlined for "good women." Both women suffer without the friendship that had previously given them life. Bakerman concludes,

Just as their friendship is essential to their well-being as children, so would their learning from one another's faults have made them adult women capable of well-being. The real tragedy in Sula is that Nel and Sula are unable to learn that lesson; their friendship ruptures and they live isolated, frustrated lives. (549)

Nel behaves as the wronged wife and receives the sympathy of society, yet she goes without Sula's friendship which before had made her complete. Talking to Robert Stepto, Morrison puts it simply: "Nel knows and believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values" (476). As a result, she lives a cold, respectable life as a put-upon woman.

Sula detests Nel's moral alignment with the rest of Medalion. She does not believe in any of the laws of the community. She breaks them all or ignores them. By the end of the novel, Sula falls for a man, Ajax, who makes her understand the desire for possession, but that relationship ends when Ajax rejects her possessive behavior. Sula cannot live happily within the bounds of conventionality. Sula is always propelled by emotion. Because
of her differentness, Sula becomes the scapegoat for the town's ills. However, the community of Medallion does not expel Sula, they simply protect themselves from her. Shadrack and Sula are different types of pariahs, but both are useful to the conscience of the community. Morrison tells readers:

Their conviction of Sula's evil changed them in accountable yet mysterious ways. 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. (102)

Indirectly, Sula motivates the people of the town to improve themselves. Cynthia Davis remarks, "Displacing their fear and anger onto Sula, as onto Pecola, they can define themselves as "better" (331).

When Nel comes to see Sula on her death bed, Sula is not able to say why she slept with Jude. Sula never operated out of the same sense of right and wrong that Nel does. Bakerman points out,

Symbolically, neither ever achieves a truly sustaining sexual union. When, finally, they do meet again, for Nel, meeting with the dying Sula is merely a part of her "respectable" role; they converse, but they do not come together and it takes still longer for Nel to realize that the great loss she has suffered is really the destruction of their friendship, the one chance they had to learn to be full, complete women. (549)

Morrison presents the characters as conventional and unconventional. She forces the reader to question the definitions of good and evil, and she suggests that the ideal person is a combination of both Nel and Sula.
Morrison has perfected her narrative technique in _Song of Solomon_, her third novel. In _The Bluest Eye_, at the outset she tells the reader what happened, then she uses the novel to provide the background necessary for understanding the end result. Her messages to the reader in that novel are blatant. In _Sula_, Morrison gives the reader hints about when to expect something strange but important. Omens like the throng of robins foretell significant events. The messages in _Song of Solomon_ are more subtly revealed. Although Morrison acts as an omniscient narrator, she never tells the reader exactly what happened. She manipulates her narration to give the reader glimpses of reality from different perspectives. By the end, readers understand the important points Toni Morrison is making because they have seen the contrasts between viewpoints. The effects of the presence and absence of love are revealed through the characters’ perceptions of reality.

Morrison always uses her structure and technique to lead the reader to the substance of her theme. She wants her readers to "see" her stories. She often uses a strange event to plant intrigue in a reader’s mind, then tells a story that provides the knowledge that makes an encompassing understanding possible. This is how Morrison begins chapter one of _Song of Solomon_:

_The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three_
Two days before the event was to take place he tacked a note on the door of his little yellow house:

At 3:00 P.M. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings.

Please forgive me. I loved you all.

(signed) Robert Smith
Ins. Agent

Readers just beginning the book think the man is obviously crazy and wonder why the community takes his declaration so in stride. Much later in the novel, Morrison shows readers the depth of the situation when she reveals Mr. Smith was a member of The Seven Days. The Seven Days is a secret organization of black men within the community who have taken it upon themselves to equalize the racial violence done to blacks by murdering one white person for every black who is killed. Morrison shows how destructive this type of vengeance is not only to society, but to the individuals caught up in it. Then readers understand why Mr. Smith felt the need to apologize. He was murdering others in an effort to save his race. Reasons he felt driven to fly, to escape and even to kill himself are more comprehensible. Readers feel a rush of sympathy for this man because all of the sudden they understand the struggle in his life. These men, like those in other militant groups, felt they had to take some kind of control to end the horrible crimes being committed against innocent blacks. They felt they had to counter that violence with equal violence. Morrison presents the situation from the point of view of those black men. She shows their good intentions, but then she shows how their line of thinking breaks down. The members of The Seven Days become consumed in their hate and vengeance. In
fighting for an equal society, they commit crimes against humanity that the individuals have difficulty living with and that defeat their ultimate purpose. Guitar, Milkman’s best friend and a member of The Seven Days, loses his focus when he becomes consumed in violent anger. By the end of the novel, he is hunting Milkman. Guitar shoots and kills Pilate when he spots her standing up by a grave she and Milkman have just dug. Guitar is on the mountain to kill Milkman, but in his anxiousness he murders Pilate. Morrison shows that he has been ruined by his involvement in The Seven Days. He no longer feels discomfort in killing people. He has been hardened to feelings.

As Morrison guides readers into understanding the forces behind seemingly ludicrous behavior, she gives readers a capacity for empathy. She does more than explain the deviant; she presents “successful” characters who display the important human qualities for survival. Henry Porter is also a member of The Seven Days. Readers initially meet him totally intoxicated in the loft of a barn. He is shouting to on-lookers, calling for a woman, and urinating onto the crowd. By the conclusion of the story, he has moved into a small house with First Corinthians, Milkman’s sister. Moving into a domestic setting, Henry Porter releases his association with The Seven Days. He pulls out of the destructive organization and works toward fostering love and family ideals in the remainder of his life. He is an example of a character who overcomes his past and moves into a healthier, happier future.
Morrison illustrates that with love comes survival. She suggests love becomes a more effective weapon than violence.

Morrison's strongest illustration of this theme emerges through her character Pilate Dead. Externally, Pilate appears as an unimportant person in the community. Macon Dead, Milkman's father, despises her unkempt appearance and bootlegging activity. He fears she will be an embarrassing reflection on him among his white, banker acquaintances. Because he values money, power and appearances, he judges Pilate harshly. After their father's death, he and Pilate encountered a stranger in a cave they were hiding in. Startled, Macon killed him and both he and Pilate ran. They had found a large sack of gold the stranger was apparently looking for, and Macon thinks Pilate went back and took the gold after they parted.

Through Pilate's telling of the cave scene, Morrison shows the reader that material pursuits are of no interest to her. Morrison stresses that the qualities Pilate exudes—love, nurturance, understanding, and responsibility to family—are the most critical to human existence. Pilate carries the sack of bones with her all those years because she feels a deep responsibility to her family and humanity in general. In a dream, Pilate hears her father say, "You can't just go off and leave a body," and she thinks he means the body of the stranger she and Macon left in the cave. Her father was talking about his father, Solomon, dropping his son whom he tried to take with him on his aerial return to Africa. Pilate's father wanted her to bury his
bones. Despite Pilate's incomplete understanding, Morrison holds her up as the most admirable character.

Pilate's "feminine" approach to life, through nurturance, is more successful in perpetuating the race of black people than the typically "masculine" way through power struggles. Pilate has the important wisdom that comes through the experience of living. Anne Mickelson states,

Implicitly, The author establishes Pilate's capacity for placing herself in harmony with the laws of the earth and nature. Within the orbit of Morrison's moral vision, these laws have to do with the truths of the human heart. They are the necessity to demonstrate courage, endurance, sympathy, and desire to help others, while surviving with dignity. (24).

She opens the doors for Milkman's self-discovery. Pilate provides him with the background information that he needs to seek out his family history. She is also a living example of the endurance that comes from cultivating a family and loving the members unselfishly. Milkman secures his new understanding partly from the history of Solomon in his ancestry and partly from Pilate's living example. At the end of the novel, Milkman realizes the importance of names to a person's family heritage. He senses that Pilate had that understanding all along. Pilate placed the passage in the Bible from which her name was taken in a gold box, and she wears that box as an earring. Milkman says,

No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. (333)

Morrison suggests that what Milkman is now piecing together through a logical process what Pilate unconsciously, but in-
tuitively knew all along. In an interview with *Essence*, Morrison says, “If you kill the ancestors, you’ve just killed everything. It’s part of the whole nurturing thing” (25). Morrison posits that Pilate is the wisest character and the one most worth imitating because she does what comes naturally. Pilate does not deny her ancestry (as Macon does) or alter her lifestyle to conform to the established white way. Instead she adapts her behavior to the situation, always protecting her family with love. When she is dying in Milkman’s arms, Pilate says, “Watch Reba for me...I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more (340). Morrison points out to the reader what it took Milkman most of his adult life to figure out, what Pilate knew instinctively without journeying to Shalimar or encountering The Seven Days: you need the knowledge of your past to perpetuate a prosperous future. Pilate facilitates a giant shift in Milkman’s attitude and perspective. She helps him see life with the emphasis on love for survival rather than hate and violence.

Milkman is uneasy as a young boy at the beginning of the novel. He feels “almost as though there were no future to be had” (35). His parents are antagonistic toward one another. They do not display signs of love. His father does not like to talk about his family history. He mentions only the story of his father, Jake, being shot off the gatepost. Macon Dead forbids his children to see Pilate, and he stifles talk about Ruth’s
father, the Doctor. Milkman's family does not give him a foundation for understanding.

Each of his parent's needs for love go unmet. Macon longs for the sense of belonging and harmony that Pilate can offer him. He lingers outside her house, wishing he were inside where there is singing and an environment of love. But, he denies his need for family affiliation in order to uphold his permanent separation from Pilate, believing that she took the gold from the cave. The same suspicion and distrust that cause Macon to think Pilate kept the gold for herself, convince him that his wife, Ruth, had a sexual relationship with her father. From Macon's distorted perspective of reality, he tries to explain to his son "the whole truth." Macon tells Milkman that after Ruth's father had just died, he found Ruth naked in bed next to her father, sucking on his fingers. This discovery confirms Macon's previous suspicions about Ruth's close relationship with her father. Macon feels certain Ruth's father wanted to deliver her babies only to be there when her legs were spread wide. Macon says that although they may not have had sexual intercourse, there was a sexual dimension to their relationship. "The fact is she was in that bed sucking his fingers, and if she do that when he was dead, what'd she do when he was alive? Nothing to do but kill a woman like that" (74). This is Macon's version of the complete truth. It reflects his preconceived ideas about what is most important. Morrison is critical of Macon's materialistic values and his attempts to follow the profile of a successful, white business
man. He suppresses the slave history of his people in an effort to achieve power and ownership. She urges blacks not to replace their own ideals with societally valued white ideals. When Morrison tells Macon's story, Milkman believes it and so do readers because he is respected. Milkman begins to see everything in terms of this version of the truth of his own life. He reasons,

My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers, and somebody saw and laughed... And if she did that to me when there was no reason for it, when I also drank milk and Ovaltine and everything else from a glass, then maybe she did other things with her father. (78)

Milkman struggles to understand his mother's odd behavior. He is more empathetic with, but still distrustful of, his father after what he learns from him. Even though Milkman has only one, obviously biased, viewpoint to work from, he must somehow resolve what he experienced with his mother.

Morrison uses her narrative technique to demonstrate that first impressions and external appearances are often inaccurate and based on untrue assumptions. Macon Dead appears an extremely successful character. He owns property in the community; he has the collateral to borrow money from the bank, he flaunts a shiny new car on Sunday family drives. From the outside, he has everything; however he is one of the least favorably portrayed characters in the novel. Although he has obtained the exterior symbols of status and success, his emotional self has hardened without love and family support. He has become an insensitive, uncaring person. When Mrs. Bains, one of his tenants, comes to
his office to discuss her late rent, he acts indifferent to her hardship. He simply tells her she has until Saturday to pay her rent or she and her children will be in the streets. He offers no comments to indicate he sympathizes with her difficulties, but treats her condescendingly saying, "till Saturday coming, Saturday, Mrs. Bains. Not Sunday. Not Monday. Saturday" (21).

Morrison's depiction of Macon Dead is negative because he seeks ownership and power in the manner successful whites have before him, by stepping on those who are weaker and more dependent. On her way out of Macon Dead's office, Mrs. Bains remarks, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see" (22). Morrison portrays a character her readers might assume is advancing blacks in society as self-centered and stifling. By cutting himself off from his family and acting superior to other blacks, Macon holds his race back. She suggests indirectly that blacks in power need to help fellow blacks. A strong, nurturing, supportive community is essential to the continued survival of black people. Instead, Macon removes himself from their ranks and tries to mimic the white world.

As readers learn they should not assume Macon is the most outstanding example in the black community, readers learn they should not completely accept Macon's version of the past with Ruth. It is important to see Macon's story in relation to his drives and preconceptions. He questions Ruth's love, envies her father, and wants all or Ruth's attention for himself. Macon's primary goal is to own things, and he does not trust anyone.
At first, Morrison manipulates readers into believing Macon because he seems upstanding, but she forces the reader to examine how a person’s point of view, which reflects his or her own preconceptions, leads to a selective perception of situations. What Macon sees when he enters the bedroom sparks a whole line of later proven untrue assumptions.

Morrison suggests that blacks are evaluated in terms of what white society has traditionally valued (property ownership, status, etc.). The focus and preconceptions of many whites causes them to misjudge or make inaccurate assumptions about blacks. Morrison is critical of Macon because he pursues the white standard. He abandons supporting others in the community and gaining strength through wide family ties that have sustained blacks in the past.

There is no "one" truth for all the characters. Morrison’s narration of Ruth’s side of the story reveals a less admirable Macon Dead. Ruth tells her son,

I don’t know what all your father has told you about me... But I know, as well as I know my own name, that he told you only what was flattering to him. I know he never told you that he killed my father and that he tried to kill you. Because both of you took my attention away from him. I know he never told you that. And I know he never told you that he threw my father’s medicine away, but it’s true. And I couldn’t save my father. Macon took away his medicine and I just didn’t know it, and I wouldn’t have been able to save you except for Pilate. Pilate was the one brought you here in the first place. (124)

Ruth explains that when she was twenty years old, Macon stopped sleeping with her. They had a huge fight after her father’s death, and he moved into another bedroom. She felt she was going
to die, "with nobody touching me, or even looking as though
they'd like to touch me" (125). She was starved for affection.
Ruth tells Milkman she began going to her father's graveside to
talk to someone who was interested in her even if that somebody
was underground. When Pilate came into town, Ruth was thirty.
Pilate guessed her problem immediately. She gave Ruth instruc-
tions for a potion to add to Macon's food, and two months later
she was pregnant. Macon figured Pilate was responsible, and he
was furious. Macon told Ruth to get rid of the baby. Pilate's
protection saw Macon Dead, III (Milkman) delivered safely.

Milkman asks his mother point blank, "Were you in bed with
your father when he was dead? Naked?" (126). Milkman asks about
her nursing him too. Now Ruth's deviant behavior becomes easier
for the reader to understand. Morrison's reader sympathizes with
Ruth's isolation and longing for physical contact. As the daugh-
ter of the only black doctor in town, who even saw some white
patients, Ruth was kept apart from the rest of the town when she
was a young girl also. As the wife of Macon Dead, she is equally
removed from the community, but now she does not even have the
comfort of one person who loves her. In a final plea for her
son's understanding, Ruth says, "I also prayed for you. Every
single night and every single day. On my knees. What harm did I
do you on my knees?" (126). She is telling Milkman that she
gave him his life; she watched over him. In return she took
short periods of touching.
After listening to his mother's story, Milkman feels it is the beginning, the start of his understanding. Milkman discovers that there is no one absolute truth. Many versions of the truth may be presented reflecting the individual tendencies of the teller, but real understanding can only develop through seeing life from more than one point of view. Charles Scruggs writes, "There is no 'one' wisdom in the novel as there is no one truth for all the characters. Every major character has his or her own story to tell, and the collective stories make up the novel's wisdom" (313). Milkman is the inheritor of these stories and the wisdom they grant. Morrison emphasizes that Milkman's self-discovery starts when he arrives at his own understanding of his personal history. By exploring first his family then his ancestry, Milkman finds security and order for his life. He learns the importance of family bonds, love, and nurturance. He gains strength, pride and direction that he did not have as a child.

Milkman's new self-awareness changes his attitude. Earlier in the novel, Milkman tells Hagar he likes "smooth, silky, copper-colored hair" which is unlike the hair of most black women. After Hagar's death, Milkman takes a box of Hagar's hair that Pilate saves. His desire to keep Hagar's black, kinky hair symbolizes his new ability to embrace his heritage and those close to him even though they may not appear "desirable" according to the white standard that judgements are most often made by. In other words, these women, like Pilate and Hagar, may seem unkempt and uneducated, but they have an understanding of the importance of
love and family in life. Milkman demonstrates that he is willing to maintain a physical reminder of his selfish treatment of Hagar, as Pilate kept the sack of bones she thought belonged to the stranger.

When Milkman meets Sweet in Shalimar, he accepts a giving role in their relationship. He scrubs her back in the bathtub. He does the dishes. He has learned the value of reciprocal love. This is the best relationship he has ever known.

Through discovering his family history, watching and talking to Pilate and listening to many different versions of the truth, Milkman rises to assume a new control of himself. With his understanding of the importance of loving and giving to human survival, Milkman has the power to make his life better. At the end, Morrison shows Milkman leaping off a rock to meet the challenge of Guitar's hatred. Morrison uses her narrative presentation to show readers living examples of her convictions: that preconceptions and appearances are most often wrong and that loving and embracing your family and ancestry is essential to survival of the race.

In all of her novels, Toni Morrison uses her narrative style to manipulate readers into a deeper understanding of some human condition. She offers a partial explanation of her writing process in an interview with Thomas LeClair:
I stand with the reader, hold his hand, and tell him a very simple story about complicated people. I like to work with, to fret, the cliche, which is a cliche because the experience expressed in it is important: a young man seeks his fortune; a pair of friends, one good, one bad; the perfectly innocent victim. We know thousands of these in literature. I like to dust off these cliches, dust off the language, make them mean whatever they may have meant originally. My genuine criticism of most contemporary books is that they're not about anything. Most of the books that are about something—the books that mean something—treat old ideas, old situations (26).

Toni Morrison addresses time-honored themes from a fresh angle. With a black style, talking about the whole world of black people in this country, Toni Morrison leads her readers to examine how strange situations occur and then why. For instance, Pecola withdraws into insanity because her environment cannot sustain her.

Morrison's stories engage readers so that they experience the emotions along with the characters. By the time readers get to the part where Sula sleeps with Nel's husband, readers hear Nel asking "why did you do this to me" and Sula wondering what was so wrong about it. Morrison says,

Black people don't just read, they have to absorb something. I've tried to write books so that whoever reads them absorbs them—so that the process of reading them means you have to take it in. That's a slower way to do it, but people participate in the books heavily. (84)

Through emotional participation, Morrison gives her readers the understanding that comes from "having been there."

Her novels are typically open-ended so that readers participating in the story help to make it whatever it is. She explores individual challenges that involve social issues, human
desires, and self-discovery. Even when the novel ends without a character's quest being obtained, Morrison shows that the wisdom yielded is more important than the end result. Morrison challenges the white standard of beauty, traditional notions of good and evil and the philosophy of power and violence to overcome oppression, but she does not provide resolutions. Morrison comments, "I write about the things I don't have any resolutions for, and when I'm finished, I think I know a little bit more about it. I don't write out of what I know. It's what I don't know that stimulates me" (Tate, 138).

Morrison's literature does not aim to be judgemental. Although she is critical of some of her characters like Geraldine and Macon Dead, she provides reasons for their behavior that make readers more understanding. Charles Scruggs states, "Morrison's most unsympathetic characters have her sympathy, because she knows that desire is a two-edged sword: it can lead to transcendence or to misery" (312). Macon Dead does everything Morrison suggests injures the survival of blacks: he suppresses his slave heritage, pursues material goals and cuts himself off from his family, yet Morrison shows the reader Macon is following the path to success white men before him have taken. He believes he is advancing himself and his family in the world. Almost all her characters are round, fully developed people who have redeeming as well as condemning traits.

The knowledge and wisdom Toni Morrison reveals through her characters gives readers a fuller understanding of the human
experience. She presents the reader with deviations in society and then shows how these occur and thereby creates more sympathetic readers with the background to consider why they happen. In a conversation with Mel Watkins, Toni Morrison said, "If there is any consistent theme in my fiction, I guess that's it—how and why we learn to live this life intensely and well" (48).
List of Works Cited


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