

The Technique of Juxtaposition in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The current study examines Toni Morrison's utilization of the technique of juxtaposition in her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* to distinguish the weakest party in the American society and the most vulnerable individual among them. The study analyzes some settings, characters, and concepts, in the novel besides how Morrison juxtaposed two or three of them so that one character, belief, event, or place would seem the most unfortunate among the rest. Morrison trusts her readers to identify similarities and differences between the three families included in the novel; the White family of the Dick-and-Jane Primer, the poor African American MacTeers, and the poorer African American Breedloves by placing them side by side. She also urges her readers to compare and contrast to reach a better understanding of one of the main ideas of the text, the concept that Pecola and her family are the most unfortunate among the Americans in general.

Keywords: juxtaposition, Morrison, Pecola, *The Bluest eye*, The Breedloves

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Introduction

There will be no black unless there is white. Similarly, there will be no dark black unless there is black. There is a stark difference between black and white and dark black and white if they are placed side by side. But if black and dark black are put side by side, there will be a considerable similarity. However, if we put the three colors side by side, this will single out the dark color and would make it look even darker than if it was placed beside black only or white only or put alone. This is what Toni Morrison has done in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). It is the technique of juxtaposition. In literature, juxtaposition is the placement of two or more pictures, concepts, characters, or other literary elements side by side, which for the most part, may not come together. Writers typically use this technique to make readers understand a text in view of the similarities or differences between the elements juxtaposed, furthermore, to highlight one of these elements among the rest in light of these similarities and differences. Morrison juxtaposed actions, images, settings, concepts, and characters of three families to make her readers compare and contrast, then single out the darkest among them viz., the Breedlove, and the most unfortunate member of this family, Pecola. The current study explores Toni Morrison's use of the technique of juxtaposition in her *The Bluest Eye*, and how she employs this technique to characterize the Breedlove, particularly Pecola, as the most unfortunate members in the American society, and the darkest and most miserable members in the Black community. Loaded with juxtaposition, *The Bluest Eye* has turned this literary technique from a simple literary device into creative and meaningful art.

In a place where people entertain at the idea that God created black people out of scraps left over after He had finished creating the world (Goldenberg, 2017), Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931. She is one of the greatest writers of African American literature. She is one of eight women who received the Noble prize in literature, and the first black one (Beaulieu, 2003). She published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1971. As a member of this society, Morrison had taken upon herself the responsibility of facing America with its ugly side; racism, which she has done through writing novels. Therefore, in most of her books, if not all, the hardships of racism form the main subject. Furthermore, Morrison has highlighted crucial issues that are unnoticed not by the whites, but by her own kind, black people.

In her foreword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison (2007) states that the novel is based on a real conversation between Morrison and a childhood friend in elementary school. The African American girl uncovered to Morrison her craving blue eyes to which Morrison, "was violently repelled by what I [Morrison] imagined she would look like if she had her wish" (p.x). This abiding memory has inspired Morrison to display the main reasons behind one of the significant issues related to the African American group, namely internalized oppression or simply self-loathing in a detailed fictional narrative.

The novel is about the downfall of an eleven-year-old African American girl, Pecola Breedlove, living in the late 1940s, in consequence of maltreatment at the hands of her family and community. The girl's parents do not see her as their little daughter more than they see in her the blackness they hate, and more specifically, their darkness that has led them to their miserable life. Also, the community does not see her as an innocent child more than it sees in her the ugliness of

black skin, which should be undermined. Thereupon, Pecola starts to see the deficiency in herself rather than in her family or community. She starts to aspire for beauty, which she has misperceived found only in those people whose skin and eye color counter her viz; their whiteness and blue eyes. What has enhanced this misperception is the look of love she sees in the eyes of people that surround her when they see such *beauty*.

One of the primary reasons that have made Pecola hold such misperception is the idealization of the white world. A study points out that the idealized White world “is juxtaposed against the painful Black world inhabited by Pecola and her friends” (Bloom, 2010, p.107) that is Claudia, the narrator of the novel and the youngest among the three girls, and her older sister Frieda. The ideal White world is symbolized by Shirley Temple and white dolls, which have their massive impact on the psyche of little Black girls. However, Morrison (2007) puts the reactions of the three little girls Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola side by side to show how unique is that of Pecola. To Frieda, the cup is a source of great pleasure, which draws her into “a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was” (p.19). As for Claudia, who throughout the text resists the temptations that influence her to blindly accept the concept of *Flawless Whiteness* before reaching the ‘Adjustment without improvement’ (p.23) stage. Her reaction to the cup is a child’s natural reaction to another child that gets special attention that is jealousy away from color or race instead of unnatural fascination. Next, the reaction of Pecola to the cup comes a surprise not only to Claudia, Frieda and their mother Mrs. MacTeer but also to the reader, as she drinks three quarts of white milk in a white-and-blue cup in one day which is equivalent to twelve cups of it, only to have the “opportunity to drink milk out of it [the cup] to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (p.23). Pecola’s obsession with whiteness is more potent than that of Claudia and Frieda, whose hatred of white milk proved to be stronger than Shirley Temple’s charm.

In the forward, Morrison also refers to the types of families juxtaposed in the novel; ‘crippled and crippling family’ (p.xii) indicating the Breedloves, and an ‘average Black family’ (p.xii) indicating the MacTeers. Yet, Morrison does not make reference to the White family juxtaposed with the other two families previously mentioned; it is the family of the Primer. Morrison starts the novel with an introductory piece, an epigraph made of thrice-repeated paragraph excerpted from the Dick-and-Jane reader. Schools had used this reader for teaching American children how to read in the 1930s and several decades after. The epigraph serves two principal purposes in the novel; first, it introduces the White-class family of mother, father, Dick, and Jane that opposes the other two Black families in the novel, the MacTeers, and the Breedloves. Morrison has perhaps intentionally put the White family at the very beginning of the book and as headings of some sections as well to imply the racial, social hierarchy of the United States at the time where Whites, whether poor or rich, should come first. Afterwards, Morrison follows the White family with the MacTeers and last come the most unfortunate the Breedloves. Second, the Dick-and-Jane family of the Primer performs the same role as that of Shirley Temple and the White doll in the novel, which Bloom (2007) has identified as the “Idyllic White” (p.107). It is a fictional White family made perfect and beautiful by the American media, which is perhaps why Morrison does not mention it with the other two families in the foreword, as it has been pointed out earlier in this article. The reason is that she may have wanted to undermine the family’s credibility. The

Primer may teach children to read, but for the Black children, it may also impose upon them the White's "whole schemes of value, political, religious, moral, aesthetic [that] have little or nothing to do with their actual lives" (Gibson, 1989, p.21) making them believe that if they are not white, then they are outside the realm of the Utopian American family; hence they are ugly and insignificant. Had Morrison juxtaposed a real White family instead of a fictional one with the other two Black families, she would not have highlighted that crippling effect of the Whites' Black propaganda on the two Black families especially the female child who Morrison describes with the words 'most delicate' and 'most vulnerable' (p.xi) in society.

Morrison turns juxtaposition from a literary technique into art when she builds up three images of the lives of three families put side by side in the epigraph using text. Repeating the same text three times in different forms connotes the fact that though different, the three families belong to the same society. She may not have explicitly mentioned the White family in the foreword, but she has included its way of living compared with that of the two other Black families in the epigraph. She has reflected each family's way of living in American society through three variants of the text taken from the Primer. Malmgren's (2000) statement below may well demonstrate this:

The novel's epigraph consists of three versions of lines from the Dick-and-Jane Primer—one regular, one without capitals or punctuation, and one without capitals, punctuation, or spacing. The standard critical reading of the three versions is that the first represents the life of white families, orderly and "readable"; the second, that of the MacTeer family, confused but still readable; and the last, that of the Breedlove family, incoherent and unintelligible. (p.257)

Arranging the versions of the text in this manner has helped Morrison in putting the White family at the top to imply its being the fortunate segment of the American society, and the Breedloves at the Bottom to imply its being the unfortunate segment of it.

Morrison deliberately sets *The Bluest Eye* in Ohio, Lorain, in 1941. Both place and time are influential in the history and culture of the United States. Lorain is the hometown of Morrison, where she was born and raised. It seems that Morrison had chosen Lorain only once to be the geographical setting of one of her novels, and that novel is *The Bluest Eye* (Beaulieu 2003). The ethnic diversity of this geographic area has greatly helped Morrison in calling attention to the conflicted relationship between Blacks and Whites by juxtaposing the dwellings of both in one place, which is best illustrated in Claudia's contrastive comparison between the gray houses of the Blacks and the colorful ones of the Whites while walking with Frieda and Pecola on their way to the Fishers' house, the workplace of Pecola's mother:

We walked down tree-lined streets of soft gray houses leaning like tired ladies.... the streets changed; houses looked more sturdy, their paint was newer, porch posts straighter, yards deeper. Then came brick houses set well back from the street, fronted by yards edged in shrubbery clipped into smooth cones and balls of velvet green.

The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses, and no sign of life. The backyards of these houses fell away in green slopes down to a strip of sand, and then the blue Lake Erie, lapping all the ways to Canada. The orange-patched sky of the steel-mill section never reached this part of town. This sky was always blue. (p.105)

The very first sentence of the novel, 'here is the house' brings out the importance of houses in the novel. Morrison portrays each house in the book reflect the family life of its inhabitants. The house of the Whites: to begin with, is not less ideal than the White family living in it; 'it is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty'(p.3). The colorful houses in the novel belong to the Whites, to name an example, the Fisher's "large white house with the wheel barrow full of flowers" (p.105), besides, in order to refer to those black people who have assimilated to Whites to escape the consequences of social marginalization, Morrison describes that replica of the white household, it is the house of one of the "sugar-brown Mobile girls" (p.82); Geraldine, her husband Louis, and her son Junior. She is a light black girl who believes in the power of appearance, and that beauty is everything that is far from woolly hair and ashy skin which might, if not prevented by cutting the hair as close as to the scalp as possible and applying lotion to the face, put 'colored people' in the danger of being mistaken for 'niggers' (p.87). The house of Geraldine is seen through the eyes of Pecola who seems to regard it not less heavenly than Shirley Temple or the white doll:

How beautiful, she thought. What a beautiful house. There was a big red-and-gold Bible on the dining-room table. Little lace doilies were everywhere-on arms and backs of chairs, in the center of a large dining table, on little tables. Potted plants were on all the window sills. A color picture of Jesus Christ hung on a wall with the prettiest paper flowers fastened on the frame. She wanted to see everything slowly, slowly. But Junior kept saying, "Hey, you. Come on Come on." He pulled her into another room, even more beautiful than the first. More doilies a big lamp with green-and-gold base and white shade. There was even a rug on the floor, with enormous dark-red flowers. She was deep in admiration of the flowers. (p.89)

The next described house is the house of the MacTeers. It 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" (p.10). Though struck by poverty, the house of the MacTeers shares one characteristic with the house of Dick-and-Jane, namely, being green, the color that symbolizes 'fertility' (Jackson, 2011, p.53) and 'hope' (Ferber, 2007, p.90) which are essential for existence. Although the house of the MacTeers is cold which suggests its void of warm family environment, yet it is not devoid of the feeling of security, for instance, Mrs. MacTeer may not show affection or gentleness when treating Claudia, her sick daughter. However, her temper when one of her daughters become sick makes it pretty obvious she really worries about their health, yet the rags she uses to stuff the windows are not enough to bring warmth to the house, but can only reduce the severity of cold. Beaulieu (2003) argues that, "Morrison uses domestic tasks as a way of holding family and community together," (p.115), i.e., black family and community. She also adds that Morrison

'portrays the torturous treatments with liniments and foul-tasting medicines as a means of preserving life, saving children from the ever-present threat of illness and death' (p.115)

Last is the Breedlove's abode. It is portrayed as a manifestation of poverty and melancholy together. Bloom (2007) holds the view that the Breedloves' storefront shares a similarity to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's description of a typical slave cabin: 'even with improvements slave cabins hardly offered a solid foundation for an independent domestic sphere over which the mother of the family could preside. Primarily places to sleep, take shelter, eat the last meal of the day' (p.185). At some point in the novel, Morrison let the reader know that the Breedloves have moved to this storefront apartment because the father had burned their house down. Hence, compared to the house of Dick and Jane and that of the MacTeers, the Breedloves' is no more than a pile of rubble, and the substitute is a semi-house which looks as odd and ugly amidst the other houses that surround it as its dwellers look amidst their fellow citizens:

There is an abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-Fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. It does not recede into its background of leaden sky, nor harmonize with the gray frame houses and black telephone poles around it. Rather, it foists itself on the eye of the passerby in a manner that is both irritating and melancholy. Visitors who drive to this tiny torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighborhood, simply look away when they pass it. (p.33)

Furthermore, the Breedloves have furnished their storefront apartment with pieces that do not evoke any pleasant memory. Each piece represents the embodiment of the amount of distance between the Breedloves, and their society, a case in point is the sofa which has had a split at the back during the delivery process, but the store refuses to take the blame, thereupon, the wretched family is compelled to keep it and pay monthly installment:

It had been purchased new, but the fabric had split straight across the back by the time it was delivered. The store would not take the responsibility
 "Looka here, buddy. It was O.K. when I put it on the truck. The store can't do anything about it once it's on the truck" Listerine and Lucky Strike breath.
 "But I don't want no tore couch if'n it's bought new."
 Pleading eyes and tightened testicles.
 "Tough shit, buddy. *Your* tough shit"
 You could hate a sofa, of course—that is, if you could hate a sofa. But it didn't matter. You still had to get together \$4.80 a month. If you had to pay \$4.80 a month for a sofa that started off split, no good, and humiliating—you couldn't take any joy in owning it. And the joylessness stank, pervading everything. (p.36)

The split symbolizes the chasm not only between the Breedloves and their society but also between the members of the family itself, which is reflected in family disintegration. Moreover, the anguish caused by this split has in time turned into the feeling of indifference towards every other thing at the place, including each other:

The stink of it kept you from painting the beaverboard walls; from getting a matching piece of material for the chair; even from sewing up the split, which became a gash, which became a gaping chasm that exposed the cheap frame and cheaper upholstery. It withheld the refreshment in a sleep slept on it. It imposed a furtiveness on the loving done on it. Like a sore tooth that is not content to throb in isolation, but must diffuse its own pain to other parts of the body—making breathing difficult, vision limited, nerves unsettled, so a hated piece of furniture produces a fretful malaise that asserts itself throughout the house and limits the delight of things not related to it. (p.36)

After all, children are greatly impressed by physical appearances; for this reason, *eyes* have an essential role in *The Bluest Eye*, 'they were everything' (p.45). Therefore, Pecola craves blue eyes to escape this drab greyish world she sees with her brown eyes.

As for time, the year (1941) is historically significant to the United States; it is the year that had marked the attack on Pearl Harbor, followed by the United States participation in WWII. Morrison has chosen this timing for *The Bluest Eye* to criticize America's 'nationalistic ethic that held the nation together' (Beaulieu, 2003, pp.69-70) before the war, which has proved to be only a lie after it. By choosing this particular year to set the traumatic incidents of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has juxtaposed "the concept of the American Dream and American patriotism fostered during US participation in World War II with the hypocritical treatment of the Black community at the war's end" (Beaulieu, 2003, p.69)

As it has been previously noted, the setting of *The Bluest Eye*, Ohio, Lorain is the birthplace of Toni Morrison which she once has characterized as, "curious juxtaposition of what was ideal in this country and what was base" (Morrison (1985) quoted in Lister, 2009, p.25) in other words, a place that brings two opposites together; one positive and the other negative. Accordingly, Morrison's first words that describe the place in the novel pose something of a paradox; 'Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel' (p.9). Bloom (2010) identifies this as 'juxtaposition of opposites'(p.48)which Morrison possibly manipulates to foreshadow all the upcoming antithesis throughout the novel that, in turn, best reflect this hypocritical community, to name a few examples: whereas there are three innocent girls; Pecola, Frieda and Claudia, there are three prostitutes; Miss Marie, China and, Poland. Also, there are several parenting incidents that prove that Pecola's father and mother are opposite to those of Frieda and Claudia. Pauline, who is obsessed with tidiness, doesn't mind her messy house

or her daughter's 'dirty torn dress' and 'soiled socks' (p.22), unlike Mrs. MacTeer, whose only concern is her house's cleanliness and daughters' health. Cholly exposes his family to the danger of being *outdoors*, and he does not mind wandering naked around the house in front of his children, worst yet, he rapes his daughter, while Mr. MacTeer who works hard to keep his family *indoors*, he wouldn't allow his nakedness offend the eyes of his little daughters; furthermore he fully protects them against molesters like Mr. Henry. Perhaps the MacTeers may not be as ideal as a white family; however, it appears much more positive when juxtaposed with an underprivileged family as the Breedloves.

Morrison may have displayed all these antitheses in the Black community to which she considers herself part of; however she creates antithesis through juxtaposing two matters that are ordinarily uncontested made contested through the novel for example, the name Breedlove combines 'breeding' and 'love' which are made into oxymoron when put as a name for a disintegrated family and a severed part from the body of the American society compared to other parts of this same society.

Conclusion

On the assumption that Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* would have been solely on the Breedloves, a family that belongs to the lowest class in the American society, it would have become an unrealistic novel written by a sentimental African American novelist in the eyes of a High or Middle-class African American reader. However, when Morrison has included all three American social classes of her time, she first has drawn the attention of the American society as a whole to the similarities and differences between its segments when they are placed side by side, and second, she foregrounded the most unfortunate among these segments represented by the Breedloves.

What has assisted Morrison in bringing all those parts next to each other is the technique of juxtaposition. She put all three similar yet different families, the wealthy White family of the Dick-and-Jane Primer, which is an ironic depiction of the real White American family, the Middle-class African American MacTeers, and the poor-and-ugly African American Breedloves with their abodes, styles of living, and beliefs altogether, which has highlighted the social stratification based upon a false interpretation of beauty. According to this interpretation, the American society has deemed the Breedloves ugly, and the ugliest among them is Pecola; the female child, which Morrison describes in her foreword as 'invisible' which has led to her inevitable denouement. Hence, Pecola and her family are cursed by their own people as Ham is cursed by his own father.

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