



## Blackness as Character trait in Toni Morrison's Works

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### ABSTRACT

Self-awareness, a strong personality and being able to relate to oneself and others in both white and black communities are the psychological keys for the survival of the black community. As stated previously, the characters acquire their individuality through their interrelation with each other. "In Morrison's fictions, identity is always provisional; there can be no isolated ego striving to define itself as separate from community.... Individual characters are inevitably formed by social constructions" (Ringed 55). As previously stated, the character of Eva in Sula acquires her respected position in society of mother and monarch through her interrelationship with both the white and black communities. The above quote also applies to the character of Pilate in Song of Solomon, previously described as a strong and independent woman, as she moves "just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people" (Morrison, Song 149). She has the ability to adapt to any situation in which she finds herself.

**Keywords :** Black community, White Society, survival, sublimity.

The Black Community and White Society- In all of Morrison's novels, the black community is, from one perspective, largely defined by the dominant white society and its standards. Yet, although the boundaries are set by the white society, the black community may subliminally resist those rules. Morrison thus creates setting, or background, for each of her novels in order to introduce her characters. While the physical setting initially dominates in Song of Solomon and sula, Morrison begins The Bluest Eye with a psychological setting by using an excerpt from a children's reader.

Morrison chooses to open *The Bluest Eye* and certain of its other chapters with a reference from the childhood primer *Dick and Jane*. “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Gather, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy” (Morrison, *Bluest* 1). These excerpts from this well-known American textbook reader serve as a backdrop for the setting for the novel in a number of ways. First, the familiar words from the *Dick and Jane* story establish the ultimate “whiteness” that defines the lives of members of the black community. Morrison wants the reader to understand that these and other images available to the black society serve to internalize racism by illustrating that to be glad, contented and successful means that one must be a part of white, middle-class suburbia. Secondly, Morrison also uses the *Dick and Jane* citations to expand on the appalling fact that this “cheerful and perfect” white family was an accepted part of the educational learning systems in the US through the mid-1970s when the books were finally fondly as exceptional learning tools. Finally, the telegraphic sentences serve as a reminder that just as exceptional learning tools. Finally, the telegraphic sentences serve as a reminder that just as spaces and functional words are omitted, so is the distinctiveness of the black society as it completely submits itself to the white ideal. Furthermore, the novel is divided into the four seasons of Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer, which inform the reader that “to everything there is a season” and that the actions occurring in this narrative are a part of the inevitable cycle of life and the dominant “whiteness” of society which will eventually repeat itself. Following the initial psychological backdrop of the novel, the reader finds that *The Bluest Eye* take place in Morrison’s home town of Lorain, Ohio. Lorain is known for its steel mills and shipyards and is located on Lake Erie. In the novel, the black community of Lorain is separated from the upper-class white community, also known as Lake Shore Park, a place where blacks are not permitted, unless they are employed by a white family. This further emphasizes the perspective that the boundaries of black society are set and defined by the dominant white community. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer go in search of Pecola a Lake shore Park where Pecola’s mother Pauline works for a white family, known as the Fishers. “The lakefront houses were the loveliest. Garden furniture, ornaments, windows like shiny eyeglasses...[the] sky was always blue” (Morrison, *Bluest* 105). The girls are thus subliminally testing the white geographical boundaries. However, their stay is short-lived as Pauline is furious at Pecola for tipping over a pan of blueberry cobbler, “Crazy fool... my floor, mess....look what you... work...get on out....her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries and we backed away in dread” (Morrison, *Bluest* 109). As the novel progresses, Morrison shows that there are always devastating consequences when the boundaries of racism are tested. Unlike the black communities in *Song of Solomon* and *Sula*, Lorain in *The Bluest Eye* is marked by blatant differences in the economics standing of its members. There are middle class families such as the Peals and the characters of Geraldine and her son Louis junior; the lower-middle class Mr. Henry Washington and the MacTeers; and finally, the lower class Breed

loves. These differences exert pressure on the members of the black society and its future and are displayed in the attitudes of the people towards one another. When Geraldine arrives home to see Pecola in her house she “saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head... the cheap soles, the soiled socks...the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up... She had seen this girl all of her life...they were everywhere Get out, you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house” (Morrison, *Bluest* 92). The plight of this black community is further exemplified by social pressures which are inscribed in the character’s consciousness and reflect white supremacy and the constant inequality that exists. The social pressures include racial tension and the necessity of the black community to know its place. Although these pressures are mainly of a psychological nature, they may be enforced by physical violence. This is shown in *Song of Solomon* as the men listen to news on the radio of a young Negro man named Emmett Till. For merely whistling at a white woman, he is brutally murdered by white supremacists. The black character of Pauline is known as Polly in the white Fisher household. She is renamed by the daughter in the Fisher family thereby giving dominant power even to the youngest member of the white society. She is degraded by her white doctor when giving birth as he states, “these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horse” (Morrison, *Bluest* 125). Further, as Miss Alice and Mrs. Gaines are talking, they realize the constant gender inequality that exists in the black community, “Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, ‘Do this.’ White children said, ‘Give me that’. White men said, ‘Lay down.’ The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other” (Morrison, *Bluest* 138). According to Cynthia Davis’s essay, *Self, Society and Myth in Toni Morrison’s Fiction*, “All of Morrison’s characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it” (Davis 27). The setting for *Sula* is a small town in Ohio, located on a hillside known as “Bottom”. Here again is evidence of the oppressive white society manipulating and mistreating the black community as a white slave owner promises his slave fertile “bottom” land as well as his freedom. However, the slave is deceived into believing that the land on the hillside is “rich and fertile...the bottom of heaven [and is] the best land there is” (Morrison, *Sula* ). The white community establishes itself in the rich and fertile valley while the black community is forced to live on the boundary, or margin, of the white society. Nevertheless, and despite this “nigger joke” (Morrison, *Sula* 4), the black community identifies with the designated area, which leads to their acceptance of and consent to live in a degraded situation, “The black people watching her [dancing] would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley men to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their head rags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of the hand somewhere behind the frayed lapels, somewhere in the sinew’s curve” (Morrison, *Sula* 4). Morrison baits the reader with binary opposites as she continues to play with the geographical location of “Bottom” being the hillside area instead of

the lower fertile valley; “Bottom” as the less advantageous place to live both for social and economic reasons and yet, which becomes an attractive area for the white community in the 1960s as ironically; the community of “Bottom” is turned into the Medallion City Golf Course which is not located on the flat valley, but rather on a hilly area of land where “the soil slid down and ...the wind lingered” (Morrison, *Sula*). Finally, Bottom is not a recognized municipality in itself, but has boundaries which are defined by the white society of Medallion and according to Morrison, “it wasn’t a town anyway: just a neighbourhood” (Morrison, *Sula* 4). Nel, lifelong friend of Sula, chooses the role of wife and mother and remains true to her hometown and her roots while accepting her status in society. These social rules were the accepted values infused from childhood where she “sat on the steps of her back porch surrounded by the mother’s incredibly orderly house... waiting for [her] fiery prince” (Morrison, *Sula* 51). However, her fiancé Jude also attempts to attain the social role of family breadwinner and lines up for a job on the New River Road. “It was after he stood in lines for six days a running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over ‘Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow,’ that he got the message” (Morrison, *Sula* 82). Jude realized that not only was his opportunity of employment as well as his hopes and dreams in the hands of the dominant white employer, but also that his masculine identity was connected to his work situation and therefore tensions and frustration arose which eventually led to him pressuring Nel into “settling down”. In *Song of Solomon*, the reader is absorbed into the black community, an entity unto itself, but yet never far removed from the white world. The first pages of the novel describe “Not Doctor Street” and “No Mercy Hospital”. These names are used within the African-American community but are unofficial and not recognized by the white city rulers who instead identify them as Mains Avenue and Mercy Hospital. This “hidden” or underlying resistance is based on a fear resulting from a history of the negative effects of racism. Morrison explains in her speech delivered at Howard University on March 2, 1995, that racism may vane in different forms and that it “can only reproduce the environment that supports its own health: [which include] fear [and] denial” (Morrison, 1995). Thus, racism is not entirely to be blamed on those who oppress, but also on those who are oppressed. In order to understand how this hegemony functions, one must examine the meaning of racial formation and its impact on racial identity. According to Michael Omi and Howard Winant’s, *Racial Formation in the United States*, there are three different interpretations of race. They include scientific, religious, and political perspectives. Racial formation is the process by which the above interpretations stipulate the significance and composition of racial categories. The racial category of “black” evolved with the intensification of racial slavery. With slavery, a perception emerged which formed racial identities for both slaves and colonists. Slaves found themselves in a hierarchical system under the command of the colonists. As Elijah Anderson points out in his article, *The Emerging Philadelphia African American Class Structure*, “Along with

slavery...came a white supremacist ideology that defined black people as less than human, as genetically inferior to the country's majority. Even after emancipation, this ideology persisted, all but negating the prospect of equality between the races" (55). Milkman Dead, in *Song of Solomon*, has a family name which is given to them by a "drunken Yankee in the Union Army... who couldn't have cared less" (Morrison, *Song* 18). By giving the family a new name, the white society denies them their black culture and slave origins and thus, by isolating their individualism, destroys their ethnic and spiritual identities. The name is accepted with resignation but also signifies the attitude of the black middle class towards slavery by giving them the opportunity to "wipe out the past" (Morrison, *Song* 54). This is an example of the white society wielding authority over the submissive and consenting black community. In fact, the group, or collectivity is the basis for *Song of Solomon* as there is no main character in the text. Although Milkman has a strong role in the novel, Pilate, as well as Macon among others, can also be seen as main characters. These characters acquire their individuality through their interrelation with each other. Morrison's approach is that the entire community cannot be represented by any single character. The author uses group dialogue to represent the social collectivity and to communicate its values. Porter, an intoxicated man in *Song of Solomon*, is encouraged by a group to express his emotions. Later in the novel, Morrison uses group dialogue again as a circle of men at the General Store are angry concerning their rejected attempts at hospitality and verbally assault Milkman. This leads to a bloody scuffle. Dealing with Social Pressures in the Black Community In all three novels, social pressures lead to frustration. Porter, as mentioned in the above example, exposes the average daily living conditions of the black community. His drunkenness expresses an intense frustration in the form of an insane need to be accepted and loved (Morrison, *Song* 26). Porter's character is an expression of the general deterioration and the self destructive atonement of the whole community. Porter, while sitting on the attic window of his house, is not ridiculed for his behavior by his friends, but rather good-naturedly accepted as if this type of behavior was the norm, Instead of being condemned, his outward display of emotion and frustration is shared and understood by the group. Eva, in *Sula*, is frustrated by her son's drug addiction. Plum adhered to the social expectations of his country and served in the war. However, upon returning home, his life revolved around drugs and alcohol, presumably to dull the pain of his horrific experiences. Although Eva loves her son, she is at a loss as to how to quiet his "demons" and therefore douses him in kerosene and sets fire to him. Nevertheless, the black community does not condemn Eva for this transgression, nor or her daughter Hannah's death, despite the ambivalent circumstances surrounding it. Morrison also shows that social pressures lead to internal frustrations in *The Bluest Eye* as Pauline becomes disillusioned with her married life with Cholly, as well as being mother to Sammy and Pecola. Her frustration with her black life is assuaged only when she visits the picture shows and can lose herself in her white fantasies. The tension that she feels gives her strength to change and "it was her good fortune

to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linens, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it" (Morrison, *Bluestone* 127). Her transformation is complete is complete when her name is changed to Poly. The characters in Morrison's novels, then, reach their fullest potential and development within the boundaries of the community. In contrast with European-American literature, where characters are made heroes as they distance themselves from society because of their ideas or innovations, the characters in African-American literature are made distinct because of their determination and contribution within their society (Mbalia, 90). Thus, the characters' survival depends upon them existing within the boundaries of the community. While there is some criticism concerning this theory surrounding the character of Sula who is said to have achieved her individuality outside the community, her adult identity is actually an effect of her childhood upbringing and experiences in the black society. Her return to Bottom and her "roots" shows her ultimate need for a little control in an otherwise racist world.

### **Physical Demarcation**

While there is no main character in *Song of Solomon*, the members of the collectivity are highly unique individuals. By giving her characters different physical and psychological features, Morrison defines blackism, which is the racialization and class difference within the black community. Paradoxically, these characteristics also contribute to the foundation of the survival of the black community in that the interpretations or misinterpretations of these characteristics affect the characters' role in society and their perceptions of self. Blackness, birthmarks, and other physical demarcations, while being symbols of individuality and exclusion, are used by the author to symbolize the participation of her characters on a deeper communal and racial level. Pilate is born without a navel. She delivers herself at birth and has no living mother, no tie to her past and is not accepted by her community. This woman is an outsider and people reject her as "something God never made" (Morrison, *Song* 72). At the same time, she is an individual who has had to start with nothing. She "threw away every assumption she learned and began at zero" (Morrison, *Song* 149). Because Pilate is not dependent on anyone, she is psychologically portrayed as a strong, self-invented black woman. Physically, Pilate represents the prototypical African woman; she holds herself tall and has black skin and wine-colored lips. Macon remarks, "If you ever doubt we [were] from Africa, look at Pilate" (Morrison, *Song* 54). Pilate, her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar live in an area of town called Southside. This is quite appropriate, as she is Milkman's first connection to his southern origins. One could say that she is Milkman's guide, or "Pilot" in his search for his legacy. Macon, as the representative of "Northern" materialism, tells Milkman "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one" (Morrison, *Song* 55). At the same time, it is Pilate in all her blackness that encourages Milkman to drop his father's white ideals and adopt his true black heritage. In the community's attempts to "define" Sula upon



her return, she is seen as evil, “The presence of evil was something to be first recognized, then dealt with, survived, outwitted, triumphed over. Their evidence against Sula was contrived, but their conclusions about her were not” (Morrison, *Sula* 118). Sula’s presence, or role, in the community is defined by society’s perspective concerning her birthmark, which is initially described as “a stemmed rose [which gave] her otherwise plain face a broken excitement”(Morrison, *Sula* 52). The girl is seen as having a strange exterior beauty, but with an unpredictable and vivacious core, just as a rose is beautiful to the eye, but can cause pain and unpleasantness to the one who touches its stem. As Sula’s character evolves into an independent, confident and sexual woman, so has her birthmark become darker and is described as Hannah’s ashes, symbolizing suicide and death, as well as a copperhead, bringing to mind the snake and sin associated with the Garden of Eden. Morrison, however, credits Sula with the virtue and integrity if remaining true to herself and her desires and ambitions. Further, her lack of falseness, coupled with the independence of her character is in direct contrast with the community’s sense of pettiness and dependence of her character is in direct contrast with the community’s sense of pettiness and dependence and is what causes them to hate her see her as an outsider. While physically in the community, Sula refuses to adhere to the norms and conventionality of its members, such as marriage and childbirth. The character of Shadrach, in Morrison’s *Sula*, has not been given a physical demarcation, but rather a mental one. Shadrach, saved from the biblical “fiery furnace” survives World War I and returns to Bottom with severe headaches, hallucinations concerning the “monstrosity” of his hands, and with no sense of identity, “Twenty-two years old, weak, hot, frightened, not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn’t know who or where he was” (Morrison, *Sula* 12). Thus, Morrison uses the “mark” of insanity and eccentricity of the character of Shadrach to bring a deeper understanding of the fear of death to the black community and therefore enhance its survival. Another type of physical demarcation is that which is caused by self-mutilation. In contrast with deformity, such as a birthmark, or deficiency, as will be noted below in the case of Pecola Breedlove in *Bluest Eye*, self-mutilation is the character’s confrontation with society’s repressive social demands. Susan Willis, in her article *Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison*, explains that it is a means of escaping the societal forces of “white domination” and a method of reaching freedom. She states that “self-mutilation brings about the spontaneous redefinition of the individual, not as a alienated cripple – as would be in the case of the bourgeois society – but as a new whole person, occupying a radically different social space” (Willis 40 ). Both Sula and Eva Peace exhibit this violence towards self and in doing so, strengthen their status in the black community. Sula, when threatened by the white domination of four teenage boys, responds by using a knife and cutting off the top of her finger in a display corresponding to the act of male castration. This act shows her repudiation of white dominance and refusal to accept the lower status of a black woman. Although the details surrounding and refusal to accept the lower status of a black woman. Although the details surrounding Eva Peace’ loss of her

leg are not quite conclusive, the narrator hints that this act of self-mutilation was done in order to obtain insurance money which would enable the woman to provide for her children. She confronts the “white laws” of society and uses them to her own benefit and therefore achieves her own financial independence. Eva, the biblical mother figure, is seen as “creator and sovereign” and her status in society is heightened because of her sacrifice, “and adults, standing or sitting, had to look down at her. But they didn’t know it. They all had the impression that they were looking up at her, up into the open distances of her eyes, up to the soft black of her nostrils and up to the crest of her chin” (Morrison, *Sula*). Although Eva’s role is one of dominance in the black community, she is not a threat, but instead is admired. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline Breedlove has a limp, caused by a rusty nail which penetrated her foot when she was a child. The nail, which biblically symbolizes sins and rebirth, causes her a physical disability which lays the foundation for her perception of self as a child. “This deformity explained for her for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible: why she... had no nickname: why.... nobody teased her: why she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace” (Morrison, *Bluest* 111). Pauline’s constant struggle with her role in society, and her eventual search for physical beauty, leads her through many changes which impact the survival of the culture of the black community. While other women conform to the white standard of beauty and straighten their hair, Pauline does not; nor does she attempt to change her dialect to the conventional way of the “white” vernacular. Although she “merely wanted other women to cast favourable glances her way” (Morrison, *Bluest* 118), she realizes, with the loss of her two front teeth, that she herself will never achieve physical beauty and instead, experiences a “rebirth” in her identity. She finds a new status in the community “and her process of becoming was like most of ours” (Morrison, *Bluest* 126) which involved great virtues and high morals. Thus, Pauline becomes representative of the black feminine community by her speech and actions, “Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (Morrison, *Bluest* 127). This rebirth, caused by the “rusty nail” and associated with “thorns” and the “cross”, could seemingly be seen as Pauline’s ultimate assimilation into the community, however, Morrison takes the character a step further as she finds work with a wealthy white family. This employment, coupled with her enjoyment of watching “white” movies, create fantasies of beauty that can only be found in the white ideal. Pauline again goes through a metamorphosis where she despises the blackness and everything about that community. Her “cross” is actually her skin color and the limitations of being a black woman. Pecola Breedlove is the central figure in *The Bluest Eye*. Her physical deformity is her “ugliness”, a perception that is shared by the community and that forms the girl’s own identity. She is a “winged, but grounded bird” and is always the victim, whether it be schoolboys that are taunting her “Black e mo”. Pecola does not fight back. Growing up in a world where the predominant message is the white ideal of Shirley Temple beauty, Pecola is “a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit if her blackness and



see the world with blue eyes” (Morrison, *Bluest 176*). Blue eyes are synonymous with “whiteness” and Morrison’s character believes that the quality of “love” is found the white society. Her presumption of this is constantly being reinforced because of the of love that she receives from her own community. This lack of acceptance causes her to associate “ugliness” with “blackness” and she therefore mistakenly believes that she could “breed” to her own unborn baby if only her eyes were blue.

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