

From Starvation to Suffocation: Extremes of Female Repression in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

To compare a work by Virginia Woolf with one by Toni Morrison seems at first an uneasy exercise; separated by race, era, and class, the two authors and their respective novels make for an incongruous pairing. Though celebrated as an iconoclastic modernist today, Virginia Woolf owes much to the Victorian era from which she sprang, and its preoccupation with moral issues and the place of humans in what was increasingly seen to be a mechanistic world ruled by Darwinian forces. As Jane Wheare points out in the introduction to the novel, "Woolf, in her fiction, is continually drawn back to questions and values which are the product of a religious framework which she often felt compelled to decry" (xvii). Moreover, as a white, educated member of the ruling elite, there would appear to be an unbridgeable gulf between her and Toni Morrison who, "as a leader of African-American literary culture" has focused on "the complex cause of her people" in all her work (Bloom 1). Where Woolf's literary world is peopled with privileged and often superficial characters painfully struggling towards an individual consciousness, Morrison's pulsates with impoverished blacks still reeling from the injustices and brutality of slavery and its aftermath. Still, as literary critic Harold Bloom points out, at the heart of both novelists' work is a common theme, and it is one that informs the first novels of each: "The pure madness of integrities of being that cannot sustain or bear dreadful social structures is as much Morrison's center...as it is Woolf's" (Bloom 4-5).

Despite the differences in Woolf's and Morrison's nationality, ethnicity and class, the "dreadful social structures" Bloom refers to either suffocate women, as is the case with the well-bred but vacuous Rachel in *The Voyage Out*, or starve them of all that is sustaining as is Pecola's case and her mother's before her in *The Bluest Eye*. While certainly race can never be discounted in Morrison's work, this essay will also track the social constructions which serve to repress women and which prevent them from experiencing a healthy coming of age, be that in Edwardian England, or some decades later in a United States exhibiting the external signs of a corruption that had festered for three hundred years – that of slavery. A sterile and restrictive paternalism, an unrealistic and exclusive standard of beauty, and social systems which allow only limited roles for women – these are the tools of repression society variously wields in these two novels.

Of the two situations, Pecola Breedlove's is clearly the more tragic. On every level - the personal, the social and the aesthetic - Pecola is found dangerously wanting. With a mother who judges her own beauty against the standards set by 1930s Hollywood, and who comes to equate physical beauty with virtue, Pecola is doomed to life not only as an ugly girl, but, by extension, as a "bitch and a "nigger" as well. By the time of Pecola's birth, her mother Pauline has absorbed the western ideal of beauty with its Jean Harlows and Shirley Temples, and having herself settled down to being ugly (123), she resigns herself to the fact that her baby, too, is ugly. When we first meet Pecola, she imbibes this ideal as she does the milk out of her Shirley Temple cup, and comforts herself after a painful episode by eating, with the faith equal to that of a Catholic taking the host, the candy *Mary Janes* whose blond, blue-eyed trademark holds the false promise of redemption through beauty. In the face of this unachievable ideal "she wears her ugliness as a mask" (39) and, with childlike logic equates the misfortune that befalls her to her physical appearance. Unlike the narrator, Claudia, who instinctively separates

the ideal of beauty from its essentially racist underpinnings, Pecola cannot understand that “the thing to fear was the thing that made her {Maureen Peal, a light black} beautiful and not us” (74). As Morrison has pointed out, and as reported by Carolyn Denard in her essay “The Convergence of Feminism and Ethnicity in Toni Morrison’s Fiction,” the problem then is not “white society’s commercialization of an Anglo-Saxon physical standard of female beauty, but the acceptance by blacks of this standard” as well as the acceptance of the concept of physical beauty as a virtue (172).

That Pecola must suffer for her ugliness becomes the defining feature of her young life. Nor is this suffering limited to her existence in the larger world, be it only the small town of Lorain Ohio. Where home and community, however hardscrabble, provide a sense of belonging and safety to Claudia and Frieda, for Pecola it is only another purgatory. While Pecola’s brother Sammy, as a male, can escape the ‘darkly formal brutality’ of their parent’s relationship, a relationship in which invective, threats, and mutual beatings “provided them both with the material to make their lives tolerable” (42), Pecola, “restricted by youth and sex, experimented with methods of endurance” (43). Fed a constant diet of her parents’ unremitting violence toward each other, Pecola longs to disappear but with resignation, she comes to the conclusion that “As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them” (45).

If Pecola did belong to the ironically named Breedloves, it would be hard for outsiders to ascertain their familial connection. In what is arguably the most painful passage in the novel, Pauline’s rejection of Pecola is highlighted by the way the mother treats her own daughter in contrast to the way she treats the pretty white daughter of her employer. Pauline can be forgiven much once her story is known, but it is hard to reconcile the heartless and impersonal brutality with which she abuses Pecola, and the extreme solicitousness she shows for the ‘little pink-and-yellow girl’ (109).

If Mrs. Breedlove presents the reader with a maternal figure distorted by a history of personal pain and disillusionment, Cholly Breedlove provides the perfect paternal counterpart to it. Abandoned on a garbage heap at birth, Cholly has no role model to follow. He equates the one powerful male figure of his youth to images of the devil and correspondingly, while “He never felt anything thinking about God... just the idea of the devil excited him” (135). When an early sexual experience is transformed from innocent initiation into manhood, to humiliation at the hands of white men, Cholly displaces his hatred of the white men to the girl, and by extension, to all women. By the time Cholly rapes his daughter, he has only one feeling towards females - pity, but pity is not enough to stop him from perpetrating the abuse.

At the root of the Breedloves’ disastrous estrangement from human sympathy is their alienation from the black community, an alienation triggered by the family’s move north to Lorain. In a hostile world dominated by the value system of whites, the support of the black community might have provided the antidote to the destructive “distaste” Pecola encounters from whites and light blacks alike. This latter group, as exemplified by Geraldine, makes distinctions and assumptions based on color and racial features as rigid and cruel as those the whites have established. Wanting to assimilate into the dominant culture, Geraldine contrives a neat formula that brands Pecola a pariah even among blacks: “Colored people was neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (87). It is this standard that Pauline, separated from her own black roots, has absorbed and which has

prevented her from transcending the negative stereotypes to create a sense of self-worth in herself and her children.

In this perceived world of absolutes – of standards of beauty and human value which exclude her and her family - Pauline loses sight of the possibility for change, and with it, much more. As Trudier Harris observes in her essay “Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*,” “Once she loses faith in the possibility for change, she gives up beliefs that have tied her to historical black communities as well as to prevailing folk traditions” (69). The ultimate price paid for this alienation by both Pauline and Cholly, and eventually by Pecola, is the loss of caring that such community provides. For Harris, “the dissolution represented by Pauline’s refusal to mother her children, Geraldine’s distortion of the notion of family, and Cholly’s destructive abuse of his daughter” are the disastrous results of this severing of cultural ties and the resulting loss of caring (69). “With their move north, Pauline and Cholly “break the chains of continuity in culture and can only produce children who are outside that which had the potential to nurture them” (75). In short, they produce children only to then starve them.

If Pecola suffers a social, psychological and emotional starvation, Rachel in *The Voyage Out* struggles against rigid social conventions which threaten to suffocate her. Whether it is the patronizing views of men, or the willing submissiveness of women, the embedded attitudes of Edwardian England have produced in Rachel a woman who, at twenty-four, is still unformed and ignorant. The early impressions held by Rachel’s fellow travelers on “the voyage out” reflect these attitudes and the low expectations held of women in general: To her aunt, the beautiful Helen Ambrose, Rachel is, like most girls, “vacillating, emotional...” (13), a fact that none the less will do little harm to Rachel since “all men...really prefer women to be fashionable” (37). To St. John Hirst, a supercilious product of the English Public School system, she “had obviously never thought or felt or seen anything, and she might be intelligent or she might be just like all the rest” (140). Later, he will attribute the abyss that exists between men and women to the fact that women are “infinitely simpler” than men (191). Richard Dalloway’s vision of the role of women mirrors the experience of his wife, the shallow Clarissa, who “has spent her day in calling, music, play with the children, domestic duties” all of which have kept her illusions intact (56). Even Terence Hewet, Rachel’s fiancé, finds her “less desirable as her brain begins to work” (195) and echoes the prevailing view of women’s intellectual and moral inferiority when he tells her “you don’t and you never will...care with every fibre of your being for the pursuit of truth! You’ve no respect for facts, Rachel. You’re essentially feminine” (278).

While the men often come off as boorish and misogynistic, they too are held hostage to the value system they have inherited. Even as he makes plans to marry Rachel, Hewet concedes that “All the most individual and humane of his friends were bachelors and spinsters...the women he most admired...were unmarried women. Marriage seemed to be worse for them than it was for men” (229). Hirst, too, for all his cynicism and arrogance, pronounces to Helen that “Few things mattered more than the enlightenment of women” (150). These contradictory comments on the part of the male characters reflect the unease experienced by men in early twentieth-century England, an unease that, in her seminal feminist tome *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf attributes to the Suffrage campaign. One pictures Hirst and Hewet when she writes, “It must have roused in men an extraordinary desire for self-assertion; it must have made them lay an emphasis upon

their own sex and its characteristics which they would not have troubled to think about had they not been challenged” (103). And challenged they clearly were by the questions that women were raising, questions that resound throughout *The Voyage Out*. As Jane Wheare points out in the introduction, “The novel raises the central question for feminism of how, in a less than ideal society, a woman can be a good person without laying herself open to exploitation by family, husband, and, indeed, by society as a whole” (xxii).

Sheltered from the intellectual and social currents of her day, it is only upon Rachel’s release from life with her two aged aunts that she begins a slow voyage of inner discovery. It is a journey that mirrors “the voyage out” and away from England and its patriarchal, ethnocentric moorings. A first kiss awakens her to possibilities previously hidden, “infinite possibilities she had never guessed at” (67). The experience compels Rachel to examine her own life: “By this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing...made dull and crippled for ever – her life that was the only chance she had” (72). And having begun to think of her own individual life, Rachel ventures further to consider the large philosophical questions that have challenged humankind for centuries – the nature of reality, existence, and immortality. “And life, what was that?” she ponders. “It was only a light passing over the surface and vanishing, as in time she would vanish” (114). Religion, love, marriage – Rachel turns a newly critical eye to each old certainty and finds each in turn an ephemera, incapable of providing meaning. The world she had accepted without question before, “with its four meals, its punctuality, and its servants on the stairs at half past ten” is a world she now “wanted so vehemently to smash to atoms” (202).

That Rachel moves towards an individual consciousness and achieves some sense of meaning in life as it is marks her as the more fortunate of the two heroines, despite the fact that she dies before being able to fully realize it. As Wheare argues, “only in death ... can Rachel preserve her autonomy, slipping out of the grasp of the men around her who would contain and limit her life” (xxix). Though Hewet shows signs of enlightenment, it seems unlikely that he could really pull free of the expectations placed on a man of his position. Perhaps more telling than his philosophical ruminations or the off-hand patronizing comments he makes to Rachel, are the lines he quotes her from the novel he is writing: ““They were different,”” he reads to Rachel. ““Perhaps in the far future, when generations of men had struggled and failed as he must now struggle and fail, woman would be, indeed, what she now made a pretence of being – the friend and companion – not the enemy and parasite of man”” (280). Given this underlying attitude on the part of her future husband, it is doubtful that Rachel would have achieved a full realization of her potential. She would have sunk into the purposelessness and aimlessness of the lives she observes around her. She would have then died a death closer to the one Pecola suffers, a death that is not a release, not a culmination, but a slow and painful stifling, a total negation.

If, as Bloom observes, death is one of Woolf’s two central themes throughout her oeuvre (2), so one finds throughout Morrison’s work a similar preoccupation. Neither author leaves the reader in question that death will make an appearance in these first two novels. Indeed Morrison, following a seasonal structure, opens with the dying of the year, autumn. Even before we reach the story proper, the opening lines of the second preface, told from Claudia’s point of view, sound like a sort of death knell in their resigned solemnity: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941.” The

suggestion of physical death, or more accurately, lack of life, repeats throughout the novel, as when in a later passage Morrison writes of the Breedlove household, “The only living thing in the Breedloves’ house was the coal stove,” and even this was hard put to continue living for “In the morning, however, it always saw fit to die” (37). By the end, we realize that Morrison is speaking of a spiritual death and it is Pecola whom “the land kills of its own volition,” it is Pecola who “had no right to live” (206).

Woolf, too, opens her story with presentiments of gloom and death as we meet Helen Ambrose on her way to the steamer. All is gloom and smoke and chaos – “the thundering drays, the jingling hansoms, and little back broughams” and “When one gave up seeing the beauty that clothed things, this was the skeleton beneath” (5). She describes the passing shores of England early in the voyage where “old ladies ...came down the paths with their scissors, “snipped the dark-red flowers that were blooming, and “laid them upon cold stone benches in the village church” (23). In the native village, Helen experiences presentiments of death “as if beneath twigs and dead leaves she had seen the movement of a snake...The cries of the senseless beasts rang in her ears high and low in the air” (270) and the reader feels that Woolf is describing the plight of humans in a chaotic world where death can snatch one from the grips of life without warning.

Woolf uses symbolism and metaphor to convey other messages as well: As Where points out, throughout the novel Woolf introduces “passages describing the natural world which can be linked with events in the lives of her characters” (xxx), such as the tumultuous storm after Rachel’s death signifying the horror and disbelief that Rachel’s companions, tied as they are to the linguistic conventions of their class and upbringing, cannot express for themselves. Similarly, the text often invites Freudian interpretations. After Dalloway kisses Rachel, she dreams of a tunnel, a vault and a dwarf, clear representations of sexual anxiety. In another dream at the start of her fever, Rachel sees “little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards” (313), a transparent metaphor for the cramped lives of women. The novel is rife with such devices and near the end Woolf delivers a striking blow against the English patriarchal system through the use of another symbolic dream. In the scene where Terence tries to kiss Rachel, by now desperately ill, she turns from her fiancé and slips once more into a delirium where “She saw only an old woman slicing a man’s head off with a knife” (320). Die though she must, Rachel triumphs over male domination at the last, if only metaphorically.

Where Woolf employs metaphor and symbolism throughout *The Voyage Out*, Morrison uses a more direct approach beginning with the first passage of *The Bluest Eye*. Here the author borrows what she refers to in the afterword as “the incompatible and barren white family primer” (215), and through removal of punctuation and spacing converts the familiar sentences into a frenzied metaphor for the emptiness and insidiousness of the white ideal. She carries this device through with chapter headings that continue this distortion of the lines, and foreshadow aspects of blacks’ lives which make a sham of the sanitized Dick and Jane world.

With the themes thus established, Morrison gradually builds up her characters through a selective-omniscient point of view beginning with Claudia and moving to a range of characters as the “narratives branch out to assorted portraits and events throughout the black community” (Frankel 20). The reader experiences the psychological states and intimate histories of Pauline, Cholly, and other minor characters like Soaphead

Church. In this respect, Morrison's characterization in *The Bluest Eye* can be compared to Woolf's in *A Voyage Out*. Both show a deep sensitivity to what Wheare terms "the intricacy of human character and relationships," and we could substitute Morrison for Woolf when Wheare asserts that "This method of gradually, and often indirectly, providing information about her characters, rather than summing them up at the start of the novel, is much more like the way in which we actually get to know people" (xxviii).

Their narrative devices notwithstanding, it is interesting to note Harold Bloom's much debated assessment of Toni Morrison's art as it stands in relation to Woolf's. That Woolf uses conventions of the Western canon such as allusions to classical literature, while Morrison uses a language she attributes to her black roots, is irrelevant. As Bloom insists, "It is not a question of allusion or of echoing but of style, stance, tone, prose rhythm, and mimetic mode, and these do stem from an amalgam of Faulkner and Woolf, the father and mother of Morrison's art, as it were" (4). It would seem then, that despite the apparent gulf that separates these two writers, both thematically and stylistically, their commonalities may outweigh their differences. And if Morrison's preoccupation with race sets her apart, her concerns for women's dignity and self-determination in a world where men, even black men are freer, do indeed make her heir - or better yet - sister, to Virginia Woolf.

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