

SEARCH FOR BEAUTY AMIDST RESTRICTIONS OF LIFE IN TONI MORRISON'S
THE BLUEST EYE AND SULA

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison, recipient of Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, is the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American literature. She astutely describes aspects of the blacks' lives and especially of blacks as the people they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and the hope beneath the surface of black America. Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women's Liberation, she seeks to produce literature that is irrevocably and indisputably black. But the artistic excellence of Morrison's fiction lies in achieving a balance between writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature. Although firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social concerns of black Americans, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature, exhibiting universal mythic patterns and overtones.

Key Words: blacks, black culture, struggle, conflict, poverty, injustice

Introduction

Not intending to become a writer, Morrison started writing as a therapeutic means of dealing with loneliness when she lived in Syracuse. Although at the point of going to Syracuse, Morrison had no real interest in writing as a vocation, she was still haunted by a need for greater fulfillment of her own creative talents and better direction of her creative energies. In Syracuse, she decided to return to her short story about a little black girl who longed for blue eyes which she had jotted down when she was thirty. She was soon encouraged by Allen Rancler, then an editor at Macmillan, to expand it into a full-length novel. This is how Morrison became a writer. She says:

"I realized in the process of *The Bluest Eye* that writing had become a compulsion so I became a writer. I will always be a writer."

Although Morrison confesses to writing both *The Bluest Eye* and the next novel, *Sula* because they were books she was interested in reading but had not been able to find, writing for her became "the most extraordinary way of thinking and feeling – it became one thing that I was doing that I had no intention of living without." In short, as Morrison told Thomas Le Clair, "writing became a way to become coherent in the world."

Black writing did not come into being as a result of some black persons' desire to exercise the "inspirational muse." What motivated blacks to write was the condition of the oppression, and what they desired of their writing was to ameliorate their condition. By virtue of its origin, nature and function, black writing is mission-conscious. From the beginning, black writers have a literature of social protest and human enlightenment. Being a black writer is an ennobling exigency in black literature and it constitutes one of the supreme enrichments of black life and black culture. This has been and is the burden as well as the heritage and the legacy of every black writer in white America.

Explaining the genesis of first two books, Morrison remarks, "I wrote *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* because they were books I had wanted to read. No one had written them yet, so I wrote them. My audience is always the people in the book I'm writing at the time I don't think of an external audience."

Her fictional world is predominantly black. In her earlier novels, young black adolescent girls and black women, by and large, are at the centre stage. *The Bluest Eye* is a novel which is a testimony to Morrison's deep interest in black people and their lives, their culture, their love of music, racial and sexual injustice and poverty faced by black people. Morrison's creations represent "lasting expressions of the black woman's creativity." In her *Black Women Novelist: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976*, Christian remarks: "Toni Morrison's works are fantastic earthy realism. Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixture of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Primal in their essence, her characters come at you with the force and beauty of gushing water, seemingly fantastic but as basic as the earth they stand on."

Sula and *The Bluest Eye* depict the search for beauty amidst restrictions of life, both from within and without. In both these novels the black woman, as girl and grown woman, is the turning character, and "the friendship between two women or girls serves as the yardstick by which the overwhelming contradictions of life are measured."

Pecola and Sula, Pauline and Nel are double-faced. They look outward and search inward. They try to find some continuity between seasons, the earth, other people, the cycles of life, and their own particular lives. They, more often than not, find that there is a conflict between their own nature and the society that man has made, to the extent that one seems to be an inversion of the other. Thus, Morrison's novels are rich, not only in human characterization, but also "in the signs, symbols, omens, sent by nature. Wind and fire, robins as a plague in the spring, marigolds that won't sprout, are as much characterizations in her novels as the human beings who people them."

Toni Morrison made her debut as a novelist in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye* and soon gained attention for her epic power, poetic imagery, fabulistic quality, richly expressive depiction of black America and the wonderful richness and vitality of her language. *The Bluest Eye* depicts the story of two young sisters Claudia and Frieda Macteer growing up in a tiny provincial black community in Lorain, Ohio in 1940s. Their friendship with Pecola Breedlove, a homely outcast little girl, is the focus of the novel and how she has been mercilessly victimized by her parents and community that she retreats into insanity. Morrison described this novel as a book about "the absolute destruction of human life because of the most superficial thing in the world – physical beauty."

The theme of *The Bluest Eye* is simple, the desire of a black girl for blue eyes. But it is also a real and symbolic statement about the conflict between the good and beautiful of two cultures and how it affects the psyche of the people within these cultures. Thus the theme embraces "the conflict of artistic and societal values between the Anglo-American and Afro-American cultures, complicated by the psycho-political dominance of one culture over another. In short this novel is "about mythic, political and cultural mutilation as much as it is a book about race and sex hatred."

The nature image of marigolds not sprouting in spring of 1940-41, is the major structural element of the novel. There are ironic insights and intensely evocative imagery, which renders a great strength and lyrical charm to the narrative.

By 1973 Morrison's career as a novelist soared as the publication of *Sula*, her second novel, clearly marked her as a significant literary voice in America. This seminal work reflected the shift in the mood of society

at large where the emphasis had veered from the mass struggle for black consciousness, to the personal struggle for self-realization and affirmation. Just after the publication of *Sula*, Morrison in 1974 stated:

“What we (blacks) have to do is to reintroduce ourselves to ourselves. We have to know the past so that we can use it for now”.

Sula is again an evocative, over-pervading search for ‘self’ of the heroine. There are unforgettable characters of Eva, the grandmother and Sula, the granddaughter. The household of Eva Peace is strange, where Eva, the matriarch manipulates the lives of all around her. Sula is a rebellious, unconventional woman, whose life becomes one of unlimited experiment. Sula depicts the intense, forty-year friendship between two women: Sula and Nel. Nel is the conventional woman who accepts the societal more and rigid moral code of the insular black community of Bottom whereas Sula defies them. Sula is a complex woman who is “at once self-reliant, amoral, predatory, alluring and completely ruthless.” In her community of blacks, Sula is first thought to be simply unusual, then outrageous, and eventually evil. She becomes a pariah of her community, a measuring stick of what is evil, and ironically, inspires goodness in those around her.

Morrison use of spare, precise language, “economical, life-like dialogues and totally convincing characterizations” makes Sula an unforgettable experience. Morrison wants the readers to feel and experience all the sensuousness of her descriptions, images, metaphors and similes, which she does successfully through all her novels. She wants that the language should be ‘sweet’ and ‘seems should not be seen.’

Notes Cited

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