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The Marigolds Do Not Bloom:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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1

At the beginning of Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison creates an interesting and unique device to bring the flower marigold into focus: "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow.*"¹) At the outset, the tragic ending of the story is revealed. The fact that the seeds of marigold do not sprout corresponds with the fact that the baby Pecola had by her father is born dead. The opening phrase, "Quiet as it's kept," suggests that a secret, "there were no marigolds," is shared between the narrator and the reader. Marigolds are one of the important motifs of this novel. There are other flowers such as dandelions and sunflowers. All of these flowers are "yellow." "Yellow" of the flowers and "blue" in the title of the novel are used as metaphors. It is also important to note that there are negative sentences in the beginning: "there were no marigolds," "the marigolds did not grow." The negatives "no" and "not" emphasize not only the tragedy of the protagonist Pecola Breedlove (Breedlove is an ironical name, for she was ill-treated by her parents and the community.), but also the disunity in the narrative structure. I will analyze how the structure of the novel as well as the motifs of "flower" and "color" is closely related to the theme of the novel.

The Bluest Eye presents a simple theme — the story of an

eleven-year-old black girl, Pecola, who wishes to have blue eyes in order to become beautiful and therefore happy. Being raped by her father, Cholly, Pecola becomes insane and she believes that her eyes are turned blue by a fake preacher, Soaphead Church. This theme is sustained and evolved by the structural device of the novel. A primer at the beginning offers an interpretative key to Morrison's text. The thrice-repeated primer serves as an epigraph. The novel begins with prose familiar to American elementary school children: "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green and white house. They are very happy" (3). The family presented in the primer is the middle-class white family. The happiness of the white family is reinforced by the correctness of punctuation and spacing of words. Such stability is dissolved in the second and third version of the primer. The second version, correct spacing of words without punctuation, reflects the world of Claudia MacTeer. Claudia is a nine-year-old narrator of the novel, and she represents the middle-class African-American family. The third version, enumeration of letters without punctuation, suggests the life of Pecola who goes insane with the earnest desire to have blue eyes.

The Bluest Eye takes place in Lorain, Ohio, in 1940-41. The novel is divided into four chapters, each with a title from one of the seasons, "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer." The first chapter begins with autumn, instead of spring. Barbara Christian gives two interpretations to this structural device:

Appropriately, the year does not begin in January or in the spring, but in the fall when school starts according to the rhythm of a child's life. Autumn, too, begins the book, because Pecola's story will not be the usual mythic one of birth, death, and rebirth.... Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally to madness, as the earth will not accept her seeds.²⁾

The break of natural cycle heightens unnaturalness of Pecola's

life and distortion of her mind.

2

In each chapter of the novel, Claudia's narrative begins first, and then, an omniscient narrator starts his narrative. There are technical characteristics to identify the two narratives. In Claudia's story, the last words in each line are arranged irregularly, as if she had typed the sentences. On the other hand, in the omniscient narrator's narrative, the last words are arranged regularly. At the beginning of the omniscient narrative, there is a three-line heading without punctuation, which is a part of the Dick and Jane primer. The novel is narrated by two voices: by Claudia and by the omniscient narrator. Moreover, Claudia's story is narrated from two points of view: from the view of a nine-year old girl and from that of a grown-up woman. For the most part, Claudia tells her story as Pecola's friend from a girl's point of view. From time to time she recollects her past from an adult point of view, and makes comments objectively on the things she could not understand when she was a child.

I will then analyze the effect of such double-voicedness in the narrative. The key that helps to understand Morrison's fragmentary narrative is the three-line heading before the omniscient narration. The heading is one of Morrison's unique structural devices: "*HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWH / ITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETT / YITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYP*" (33). Not only does the heading announce the opening of the omniscient narration, but also bring the topic (the houses of Claudia and Pecola) into focus and integrate the fragmentary narrative. The enumeration of capital letters is like a spell. The green-and-white house fascinates black people. The break of the word "white" in the first line suggests hatred of black people because they cannot afford to buy such a house. Despite the hatred towards white people, black people cannot but

admire the white standards of order and beauty. Such ambivalence is demonstrated in this heading. The break of the word "pretty" in the second line shows their anger, while the repetition of that word in the third line shows their admiration.

The first chapter "Autumn" begins with Claudia's narrative. In contrast to the beautiful green-and-white house in the heading, Claudia's house is shabby and unclean: "Our house is old, cold, green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice" (10). The only similarity to the house of the white is the color "green." "Green" corresponds with Claudia's vitality, which is supported by her mother's affection. Although most of the rooms in the house are dark, there is a warm light of a "kerosene lamp," which symbolizes love of Claudia's mother. When Claudia is a little girl, she thinks that her mother is not kind to her and scolds her if she catches a cold. She confesses that it is not until she grows up that she recognizes the true affection of her mother. She revises her memory: "But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window" (12). At first, Claudia's voice as a child states the financial difficulties of the black family. Then Claudia's voice as an adult expresses the good relationship of the family. Even though they are poor, Claudia and her sister Frieda live happily, supported by their parents' love. By contrasting the two voices of Claudia's narrative, Morrison subverts the general idea of a black family, and highlights the positive function of the family. Moreover, Claudia's narrative reveals the voidness of the white family described in the heading. The white family might live content in the material sense, but not in the spiritual sense.

The omniscient narrator's narrative is arranged after Claudia's narrative. In the first chapter, juxtaposition of Claudia's

narrative with the omniscient narrative emphasizes the difference between Claudia's family and Pecola's family. Like Claudia, Pecola lives in a shabby house. But Pecola Breedlove's dwelling is much more wretched than Claudia MacTeer's: "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" (33). The Breedloves live in this "abandoned" store. The store overwhelms the "leaden," "gray," and "black" background. Not only the outside of the house makes people "irritating" and "melancholy" (33), but also the dwellers in the house are disgusting. Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove hate each other and they often fight brutally by a tacit agreement not to kill each other. The reaction of the children to the battles of their parents is different. Pecola's brother, Sammy has run away from home no less than twenty-seven times by the time he is fourteen. Pecola struggles between "an overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, and a profound wish that she herself could die" (43). In contrast to the "kerosene lamp" in the MacTeers' house, which illustrates warmth and solidarity in the family, "a sofa that started off split" (36) in the Breedloves' house, suggests the "split" in the family relationship.

Claudia's voice is followed by the omniscient voice. It seems to be difficult to find the relation between the two narratives because each chapter has its own independent story. *The Bluest Eye* is fragmentary. Comments from the point of view of an adult are interposed in Claudia's narrative as a child. The omniscient narrator can go backward and forward in time and space, into the mind of all characters. Morrison gives us some clues to link Claudia's narrative and the omniscient narrative. For example, in the second chapter "Winter," the beginning and the end of the chapter seem to correlate. Claudia begins her narration: "My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there.

His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche..." (61). The coldness of winter, snow, and "eyes" in Claudia's narrative are also described at the end of the omniscient narrative: "Outside, the March wind blew into the rip in her [Pecola's] dress. She held her head down against the cold. But she could not hold it low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement" (93). Although the narrative is fragmentary, the beginning seems to correspond with the end of the chapter. The narrative moves in a circle. Yet, such cyclical movement is broken. The two narratives are fundamentally different. Claudia's narrative continues: "A Vulcan guarding the flames, he [Claudia's father] gives us instructions about which doors to keep closed or opened for proper distribution of heat..." (61). Claudia's sense of security guarded by her father is juxtaposed with the harshness of winter, which implies Pecola's loneliness and helplessness. Such cyclical movement and its disruption appear not only in the chapter but also in the novel as a whole. There is also a hint to connect two chapters. At the end of the chapter "Winter," there is a word that foreshadows the important incident in the next chapter "Spring." The "rip" (93) in Pecola's dress in "Winter" indicates the rape of her own father in "Spring." Ironically, tragic episode such as rape takes place in spring, the season full of anticipation and hope.

3

Just as the narrative has double-voice, so too do "colors" such as "blue" and "yellow" have double meaning. "Color" symbolizes African-American identity. For example, see how Pauline, who later becomes Pecola's mother, describes her excitement when she first meets Cholly Breedlove by using the word "color." Pauline's own voice in italics intrudes the omniscient narrative as monologue:

When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of

color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking.... My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out the fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them june bugs made on the trees the night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. (115)

For Pauline, "color" is closely connected with her memory when she was living happily in Alabama. Her memory of her hometown is filled with various "colors." In fact, the "colors" are not only in the scenery of Alabama, but also in herself. Pauline was healthy physically as well as spiritually when she was young in the South. Unfortunately, the sense of wholeness as a human being is lost after she marries Cholly and moves to Ohio. The African-American vernacular in the monologue emphasizes her natural strength as an African-American woman. "Color" represents the positive aspect of the African-American or the African-American identity itself.

Morrison gives double meaning to the word "bluest" in the title, *The Bluest Eye*. The title can be interpreted in two ways. Michael Awkward gives his interpretation:

"[T]he bluest eye" implies loneliness (the single "eye"/I), blueness in the Afro-American vernacular sense, and implicitly suggests that solitude — distance from the tribe — is a function of aspirations for the non-black, for blue eyes. In other words, Pecola's... status as "The bluest I" results from her adoption of white standards of perception.³⁾

Awkward presents the primary meaning of the title. Primarily, "the bluest eye" implies Pecola, the most tragic person in the community. Since "blue" eyes are the object of admiration, "the bluest eye" also suggests the consciousness to adopt white standards of beauty. The first meaning of "blue" is "melancholy," and metonymically "blue" stands for white people.

Still, there is a covert meaning in the title or in "blue."

It is more significant than the overt meaning. Notice the single "eye" in the title. Morrison applies the single "eye" instead of the plural "eyes," in order to make the reader realize the other "eye," that is also "the bluest eye." "Bluest" makes a pun on "blues." It can be said that *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola's blues. Blues helps black people to recognize their identity as African-Americans. It gives strength to survive.⁴⁾ "Blue" is metonymy for the African-American. Morrison contrives a character named "Blue," who gives relief and courage. An old drayman called Blue Jack is the only support for Cholly when he is a boy. In Cholly's memory, Blue is connected to his hometown, Alabama and familiar food: "Blue's eye caught Cholly's. He motioned to him. 'Come on, boy. Let's you and me eat the heart.' Together the old man and the boy sat on the grass and shared the heart of the watermelon. The nasty-sweet guts of the earth" (135). As Trudier Harris points out, Blue functions as a folk character: "Blue becomes a folk hero to Cholly, and, long into adulthood, after he has killed three white men and become his own legend, Cholly remembers the good times he had with Blue."⁵⁾ The second meaning of "the bluest eye" or "blue" is the African-American identity and the consciousness to acknowledge the positive value of African-Americans.

Just as "blue" has double meaning, so does "yellow" take on two meanings when it is connected with "flower." Metonymically, "yellow" is white people because it reminds us blond hair. "Yellow" as well as "blue" suggests beauty, wealth, and happiness black people cannot afford. Pecola admires Shirley Temple, a child movie star with blue eyes and blond hair. Pecola is fond of a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup and takes every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to see sweet Shirley's face. Every night, Pecola prays for blue eyes. Knowing the difficulty to acquire blue eyes, or beauty, she achieves temporary pleasure when she eats Mary Jane candies in "yellow" wrapper, by

identifying herself with Mary Jane : "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50).

The "colors" of marigold, dandelion, and sunflower are "yellow." "Yellow" is the color of the sun. The emblems of marigold, dandelion, and sunflower are the sun.⁶ Morrison attempts to put positive meaning to "yellow" "flowers." At first glance, they are ordinary flowers. All these flowers are familiar to the African-American. They are commonly seen in various places in America. For example, "dandelions" are generally considered as weeds which people try to get rid of in order to keep their yards beautiful. Pecola thinks that people dislike "dandelions" "because they are so many, strong, and soon" (47). Pecola regards "dandelions" in the same light as herself because both of them are considered unnecessary. "Dandelions," which are weeds, unnecessities, parallels Pecola, who is neglected from the community as well as white society.

At the same time, "dandelions," which come out soon after they are pulled out, symbolize the strength of the African-American. When Pecola hurries to buy Mary Jane candies to a grocery store, she is filled with anticipation. It is one of few moments when she feels happiness and confirms her value as a human being. On her way to the grocery store, she sees things she knows well — dandelions and sidewalk cracks. The yellow heads of "dandelions" make Pecola feel that she is a part of the world :

These and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble ; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away ; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (47-48)

For Pecola, “dandelions” are reality, something that she can understand and possess. Pecola acknowledges the positive meaning of life, only for a while. Last fall dandelions had white heads, but this fall they have yellow heads. Dandelions have bloomed out of season. The disorder of the natural cycle is in accord with Pecola’s life distorted by her father, the community, and the white society.

“Sunflowers” also have a positive meaning. They are described as “the beauty of the world.” In the end, Pecola suffers mental disorder: “The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world — which is what she herself was” (205). The tire rims and Coke bottles are the waste of the world, while “sunflowers” and milkweed is the beauty of the world. Things that are created and consumed by human beings are in contrast with things produced by nature. Pecola has ambivalent characteristics: the waste and beauty of the world. Unfortunately she cannot recognize her positive value. Like “sunflowers,” Pecola is beautiful, pure, and innocent. The failure to admit her own value accelerates her downfall.

4

Pecola’s mental disorder is reflected in the double-voicedness of the narrative. After the rape by her father and the encounter with Soaphead Church, a fraud who makes Pecola believe that she has blue eyes, Pecola creates another self that can be seen only by herself in order to validate her beauty, her blue eyes. Pecola is splitted in two voices. The voice of Pecola’s other self is in italics. Pecola repeatedly confirms to the other self that her blue eyes are beautiful: “Are they really nice?/*Yes. Very nice./*Just ‘very nice’?/*Really, truly, very nice./*Really, truly bluey nice?” (194).

After the double-voiced narrative of Pecola, the narrative structure of the novel is complex. The dialogue of Pecola's two selves is interposed as monologue. The three-line-heading before the dialogue indicates the beginning of the omniscient narrative. In the last three pages of the novel, the omniscient voice narrates, because the last words in each line of the text are arranged regularly. Yet the narrative has two voices. The omniscient voice alternates with Claudia's voice. At first, the omniscient narrator concludes the story of Pecola: "So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (204). It is obvious that this is omniscient narrator's voice, because it is objective and didactic. In the next paragraph, the omniscient narrator's voice is taken over by Claudia's voice which is personal: "We saw her sometimes. Frieda and I — after the baby came too soon and died" (204). The following two paragraphs are first, narrated by the omniscient voice, then, by Claudia's voice.

In the next paragraph, it is difficult to distinguish the omniscient narrative from Claudia's narrative. The first half seems to be narrated by the omniscient voice, because the futures of each member of the Breedloves are related. Then there is a change in the voice: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us — all who knew her — felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (205). Since the omniscient narrator does not use "we," it seems that this is Claudia's narration. But it is different from Claudia's former narrative. Here, the word "we" does not indicate "Frieda and I." From the phrase "all of us," or "all who knew her," "we" includes people of the community. Now Claudia represents her community. Her narration is no longer subjective. It is objective, refined, and instructive. Such changes in Claudia's voice suggest Claudia's

development. Claudia speaks for the omniscient narrator. Thus two voices of the omniscient narrator and Claudia are conflated. Such conflation of narrative voices reinforces the gap between the two voices and Pecola's voice. The isolation of Pecola's voice heightens Pecola's tragedy. The narrative gap implies the rupture of friendly relations between Claudia and Pecola.

The significance of conflation of voices is discussed by Michael Awkward:

But the situation of such a conflation of narrative voices suggests that this healing of double voicedness occurs as a direct function of Pecola's own schizophrenia. Just as the improved self-image of the community depicted in Morrison's text results from its sacrifice and projection of the shadow of blackness onto Pecola, so, too, it seems, can a healed narrative double voicedness be achieved only through the sacrifice of the female protagonist in the novel's narrative events. The sacrifice of Pecola ... is, it would appear, necessary for the achievement of the Afro-American expressive ideal of merged consciousness, of unified voice.⁷⁾ As Awkward points out, the narrative achieves a "unified voice." But we must take account of double-voicedness in Claudia's narrative. Strictly speaking, conflation of narrative voices is conflation of the omniscient voice and the voice of Claudia as an adult. Naturally, these two voices are easily united. By the unification of these two voices, the voice of Claudia as a child, which no longer exists in the narrative, emerges into the reader's mind. Morrison manipulates three narrative voices: the voices of the omniscient narrator, Claudia as a child, and Claudia as an adult. At the end of the novel, by uniting the omniscient narrator's voice with the voice of Claudia as an adult, and extinguishing the voice of Claudia as a child, Morrison makes a gap between the unified voice and the nonexistent voice, and makes the reader conscious of significance of the lost voice of Claudia as a girl.

At the end of the novel, there is a split in the narrative voice. The double-voicedness in the narrative corresponds with the narrative structure of the novel. The novel begins with

announcement that the seeds of marigolds do not sprout, and ends with explanation of why they do not grow. Although the narrative seems to move in a circle, the circle is broken. Claudia's first narration and the last narration appear to be almost the same, but there is a distinction. In both narration, she considers the reason why the seeds of marigolds do not sprout. Claudia states in the beginning: "*For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding*" (5). At first, Claudia feels guilty and admits that it is her fault that the seeds do not grow. The phrase "it never occurred to" or "might have been" indicates that she shifts the responsibility only mildly. Yet there is a change in Claudia's tone. In the end, Claudia asserts: "I talk about how I did *not* plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" (206). In the last narration, Claudia stresses the word "not" in order to maintain her irresponsibility for the failure to grow the plant. She completely shifts the responsibility onto the earth, which signifies African-American community as well as American society. She "acquiesces" in the state of Pecola as a victim. Though she acknowledges that she is "wrong," she leaves Pecola stranded saying, "It's too late" (206). Claudia is different from the girl she used to be. Claudia used to fight against schoolboys that teased Pecola, and attack Maureen Peale who said Pecola was ugly. Claudia has planted the seeds hoping the safe delivery of Pecola's baby. That Claudia exists no more. Indeed Claudia has grown up. As she aptly states that "the change was adjustment without improvement" (23), Claudia has grown up and lost the sense of justice and consideration for others.

The beginning of the novel is not the same as the end of the novel. There is not a conflation in the narrative voice. There

is not a "improved self-image of the community"⁷⁾ which Awkward points out. At the end of the novel, Claudia has lost African-American identity. The double-voicedness in the narrative and structure of the novel reinforces the loss of African-American identity. The marigolds do not bloom.

Notes

- 1) Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970 ; New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) 5. Further references in the text are to this edition, and page numbers appear parenthetically in the text.
- 2) Barbara Christian, "The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison." in *Black Women Novelists : The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* (Westport : Greenwood Press, 1980) 140.
- 3) Michael Awkward, "'The evil of fulfillment' : Scapegoating and Narration in *The Bluest Eye*," in *Inspiriting Influences : Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) 88.
- 4) Ralph Ellison gives his definition of blues in *Shadow and Act* (1964 ; New York : Vintage Books, 1972) 78. "The blues is an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism."
- 5) Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore : The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville : The University of Tennessee Press, 1991) 22.
- 6) For the symbolical images of yellow, marigold and dandelion, see Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (London : North-Holland Publishing Company, LTD., 1974). "yellow (1. the colour of the sun), marigold (2. sun-emblem: a. it opens at daybreak, till noon, and then shuts till night; therefore it was also called 'Sun's flower' in Eliz. times.), dandelion (5. sun: colour of the flower)."
- 7) Awkward 95.

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