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Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism

Jerome Bump

Jerome Bump is professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of ***Gerard Manley Hopkins****.*

The late Barbara Christian protested that literary critics have become philosophers who "have redefined literature so that the distinctions implied by that term, that is, the distinctions between everything written and those things written to evoke feeling as well as to express thought, have been blurred" (1987, 51). She was disappointed because "in literature I sensed the possibility of the integration of feeling/knowledge, rather than the split between the abstract and the emotional in which Western philosophy inevitably indulged" (56). "The Big Chill" is Roxana Robinson's term for that triumph of theory that has widened this split in many university English departments in the last two decades or so (2001).

That is unfortunate especially because emotions often generate more energy for reform of race, class, and gender inequities than abstractions, and a focus on feelings

challenges not just the way multiculturalism is taught today but the foundations of higher education itself. English and language departments[1] can lead this revolution by adopting an "emotive" literary criticism focusing on the feelings, moods, and emotional fields in readers as well as texts.[2] We can do this more easily now because of the growing academic research on emotions and the increasing recognition outside the academy that emotional intelligence is essential to many fields, including teaching.[3]

Of course, in the humanities, focus on the emotions in the text and in the reader is not new. Aristotle's discussion of pity and fear in the viewer/reader of tragedy and Wordsworth's defense of a poetry of feeling are two of the more famous examples.[4] In the middle of the twentieth century such discussion of the reader's emotions was dismissed as "The Affective Fallacy" and in the 80s and 90s, when a new reader-centered criticism emerged that often did focus on feelings, it was displaced by theories of deconstruction.[5] Nevertheless, some feminists, reader-response critics, and composition theorists continued to stress that truth is emotional as well as intellectual. At first attention was paid to subtle nuances of feeling in the reader's response to style. Then the importance of student emotions in college literature and composition classrooms was explored, and a few literary critics reminded us that knowledge is produced by reader identification with characters' feelings.[6] However, by the end of the century the momentum shifted to other studies of emotion (Hjort and Laver, 1997). Now, in the twenty-first century, the rising popularity of queer studies and of Raymond William's sense of emotions as cultural "structures of feeling" supports a new focus on emotions.[7] Hence in James Dawes's article in *American Literature* begins, "An interest in the . . . emotions that shake us when reading has in recent years come increasingly to the fore in literary and cultural studies" (2004, 437).

While emotive criticism does not necessarily illuminate the literature of relatively detached writers who seek a primarily cerebral response, other writers demand it. For example, Ilene Crawford has demonstrated that Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde all make emotion their "foundation of knowledge and ideology" (2000, 8). Other writers do so as well, but these "minority" writers are particularly important because, like Christian, they challenge us to revise not only literary criticism and theory, but also higher education: "Those of us who are teachers and scholars are always on the brink of practicing a complacent version of multiculturalism, a version that may make room for different voices but does not allow those voices actually to shift the epistemological foundations of the university" (12).

Certainly, the foundations of English and language departments could be shifted by an emotive literary criticism, especially one that connected

research on feelings of "sympathy" to the sympathetic imagination: our ability to penetrate the barrier between us and another person and, by actually entering into the other, so to speak, to secure a momentary but complete identification with her.[8] This is crucial especially for white readers of black texts such as *The Bluest Eye* for, as Gayatri Spivak put it, "the holders of hegemonic discourse should . . . themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other" (1990, 121). Imagining what it is like to *feel* like "the other" is, of course, a prerequisite of morality.[9]

The first step is to recover our *experiential* knowledge of feelings. All of us were once the ages of the children in *The Bluest Eye*. Claudia, the narrator and protoreader, listens to adult conversation: "the edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all the words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre."[10] In addition to Morrison's critique of racism, her extraordinary intelligence, and her Shakespearean gift of language, it is her ability to convey this "truth in timbre" that earned her the Nobel Prize for Literature.

For example, she communicates an "emotional field"[11] as well as Dickens. The Breedloves' torn sofa, for example, embodies their despair: "And the joylessness stank, pervading everything. . . . 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 delights of things not related to it" (Morrison 1992, 36–37). Everyone is invited to participate emotionally in this story. An engaged reader, recalling related associations and emotional fields in her own life, may thus be given a vocabulary for them, and begin to extend her sympathetic imagination even to the Breedloves.

Morrison said her writing "should try deliberately to make you . . . *feel something profoundly* in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation . . . to expand on the sermon that is being delivered" (1985; italics added; cited by Baillie 2003, 26). She "wants to involve her readers emotionally in her work. Her writing 'demands participatory reading'; 'The reader supplies the emotions. . . . He or she can feel something visceral . . . . Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience'" (Cited in Bouson 1999, 208).

Unfortunately critics rarely discuss this experience.[12] When I think of my own theory-based essay on this novel (Bump 2003), I recall Morrison's critique of Geraldine, who steadfastly denied "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (1992, 83). Dawes observed that this funkiness "is understood to have

been already lost by white people in a process that was either racial or cultural (perhaps this loss is what makes someone white)" (2006, 141). Of course this loss is not unique to English departments. For example, W. B. Stanford commented that, despite Aristotle's focus on pity and fear, "many of the most able commentators on Greek tragedy in modern times have ignored its emotional elements almost entirely. You may search through their publications without finding more than cursory references to pity, fear, anger, grief, hate, scorn, or any of the other tragic emotions, and often there is no reference to them at all" (1983, 2).

There are exceptions, of course—some "critics have remarked on the emotional impact of *The Bluest Eye*" (Bouson 1999, 230)—and thus we can use this novel as a template for the practice of an ethical emotive criticism that connects feeling to thought, in this case to psychological models of racism, stigmatism, judging by appearance, and hierarchies of emotions. We will ask the usual questions asked of this novel: What is the secret that is "between us and that is being kept from us?" What is "the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us"? However, to these questions I would add, Can feelings about ugliness enable white readers to identify with Pecola, become more conscious of the impact of racism generally, and thus better able to resist it?

However, at this point in the life of criticism our greatest need is to ask what exactly are characters and readers feeling? We can begin with Morrison's initial account of anger, sympathy, pity, being "touched," and "moved." She apparently wanted readers of *The Bluest Eye* to respond as she did to a childhood classmate:

> We had just started elementary school. She said she wanted blue eyes. I looked around to picture her with them and was violently repelled by what I imagined she would look like if she had her wish. The sorrow in her voice seemed to call for sympathy, and I faked it for her, but, astonished by the desecration she proposed, I 'got mad' at her instead. (Morrison 1992, 209)

In her "Afterword" (1992) to the novel inspired by this incident Morrison wrote, "One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. . . . Many readers remain touched but not moved" (211). I would suggest that the success of this novel, and many other attempts to challenge racism, is determined by the nature of, and relationships between, the emotions that "touch" and "move" its readers.

Rebecca Degler has shown that *The Bluest Eye* is modeled on classical Attic tragedies in which "'an ugly or deformed person was chosen to take upon himself all the evils which afflicted the community'" and was then sexually abused and killed (2006, 241; Frazer, 579). The viewer of such a tragedy

apparently felt what Aristotle calls "eleos," often translated as "pity," but Stanford argues that it should be translated as "compassionate grief" (1983, 23-24). "Pity" is no longer a good translation because in modern usage the word may mean "to be pitied for its littleness or meanness . . . miserably insignificant or trifling, despicable, contemptible," as in "generally dismissed with a pitying shrug of the shoulders" (O.E.D.). Morrison did not want Pecola to be pitied in this way, with her passivity inspiring the contempt some readers feel (Otten 1989, 24; Bouson 1999, 226). I will argue that "compassionate grief" is a more accurate description of the final response of many readers to this novel.

Nor are compassion, grief, contempt and pity the only emotions in this novel and its readers. One critic wrote that "Morrison's objective narrator offers the reader 'no escape from her anger at the dissolution of black lives'. In *The Bluest Eye*, writes another, Pecola is 'too vulnerable and uncomprehending to be angry at what happens to her. It is Morrison who is angry, and the careful form of the novel intensifies rather than deflects the reader's sense of that anger'. Indeed, the 'coherence of Morrison's vision and the structure which parses out its logic into repeating patterns offer the reader no solace, no refuge from Morrison's anger.'"[13] Hence Degler recommends that, just as Claudia gets angry at Pecola, "so too should the reader" (2006, 247).

In his review of emotion research in this century, Scott McLemee noted that "for Aristotle, the ideal was to have just the right amount of *orgê* in your system—not so much that you were a menace to society, nor so little that you were a doormat, but enough to get suitably angry, in an effective way, on appropriate occasions, for a fitting amount of time" (2003). Is this the kind of anger represented in *The Bluest Eye*? Claudia, the protoreader, does respond angrily to Pecola on one occasion. When Maureen Peal shamed Pecola by asking her if she had seen a naked man, Claudia came to the rescue by insulting Maureen: "I was glad to have a chance to show anger . . . because we had seen our own father naked and didn't care to be reminded of it and feel the shame brought on by the absence of shame" (Morrison 1992, 71). Undaunted, Maureen continued to persecute Pecola, who "tucked her head in—a funny, sad, helpless movement" (72). In response Claudia tried to hit Maureen but "missed, hitting Pecola in the face" (73). Significantly, even Claudia ended up focusing her shame-driven anger on the scapegoat, Pecola, who "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets" (73-74).

Yet the text problematizes this anger, if only because anger and hatred often miss their mark, as some readers have noticed (Yancey 2000, 317; Baillie 2003, 27). Claudia recalled that

> I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. . . . If I pinched them, their eyes—unlike the crazed glint of the baby doll's eyes—would fold in . . . a fascinating cry of pain. When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was, that it was repulsive because it was disinterested, my shame floundered about for refuge. (Morrison 1992, 22-23)

When Cholly was shamed, "never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men" (150-51). Instead, when he grew up, Cholly turned his fury on "petty things and weak people" (38), especially Pecola and other members of his own family. As these examples suggest, anger and hatred are not enough to fight racism not only because they often miss their targets, but also because they are secondary emotions, driven in turn by shame and fear.

When we acknowledge that some emotions are secondary while others are primary, shame is usually identified as the basic emotion in this novel (if not in reader).[14] When Pecola tries to buy some candy, for instance, she looks up at the shopkeeper and sees

> the glazed separateness. . . . Outside, Pecola feels the inexplicable shame ebb. . . . She trips on the sidewalk crack. Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame. Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging. Her thoughts fall back to Mr. Yacobowski's eyes, his phlegmy voice. The anger will not hold; the puppy is too easily surfeited. Its thirst too quickly quenched, it sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes. (Morrison 1992, 48-50)

Just as "militancy is an alternative to madness" (hooks 1992, 6), anger *is* better than this shame, but it is too easily left on the sidewalk. One reader felt that Claudia's anger, like Pecola's, "is readily converted to shame because she does not really understand what makes her violent and aggressive" (Matus 1998, 45). The problem is not that Claudia and Pecola do not know the right target: "And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 1992, 74). The problem is that the girls, like many readers, do not know how to direct their anger at the *Thing*.

What is the *Thing*? I would suggest that ultimately it is judging by appearance, and that Morrison focuses on ugliness to enable white readers to

feel something of what it is like to be judged by racial hierarchies of skin color and the master and family narratives that reinforce them. After all, many emotions, including shame, are generated by this "*Thing*," by comparing someone with an ideal, making them seem less than, inferior, a mistake. Crawford observed that Morrison, hooks, and Lorde "address an overlapping set of emotions in their work, most notably love, anger, shame, and guilt" and that "the conceptual and linguistic resources of the dominant culture logically construct shame as a primary aspect of black subjects' rhetoric of emotion" (2000, 14, 68). Guilt is based on the awareness that "I made a mistake," but negative shame is the fear that "I *am* a mistake" (as distinguished from the positive shame maintaining sexual boundaries between parent and child). Guilt can be purged: a person can correct and make up for a mistake. But shame is a deeper emotion: if a person is convinced that he or she *is* a mistake, they often believe that they should not have been born and that nothing that can be done about it.

When she first met Pecola, Maureen Peal says "Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in *Imitation of Life*? . . . . The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother 'cause she is black and ugly' but then cries at the funeral. . . . My mother has seen it four times" (Morrison 1992, 67-68). Gary Schwartz noticed that the girl's name in the movie was actually Peola: Pauline's "conflated name is interesting . . . . The name with the 'c' has some suggestion of Latin *peccatum* (mistake, fault, error)" (1996, 122-23). Focusing on Pecola as a "mistake, fault, error" is crucial to understanding the novel, and shame is usually considered the central emotion, especially when incest is considered the axis of the novel.[15]

However, to list the primary emotions of "minority" literature as "love, anger, shame, and guilt" (Crawford 2000, 14) may be to miss the most basic feeling of all. Today most scholars researching emotion identify fear as our core feeling, the basic emotion that drives both shame and anger (Dawes 2004, 455-65). Claudia acknowledges this in her statement about "fear" of the *Thing*. If we look deeper, beyond the shame of sexual abuse, beyond anger at the scapegoat, we find a related complex of fears that explains the emotional impact of the novel for a wide variety of readers.

The key question thus becomes, what exactly is the fear that drives racism and judging by appearance in *The Bluest Eye*? According to Morrison, the first words of the novel, "Quiet as it's kept," "are conspiratorial. 'Shh, don't tell anyone else,' and 'no one is allowed to know this'. It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us" (1992, 212). For most critics "the rape scene is the emotional center of the novel" and the incest its chief secret (Bouson 1999, 213). However, there is another secret, one better kept by almost all readers: fear of ugliness. Morrison recalled that "although I had cer-

tainly used the word 'beautiful', I had never experienced its shock—the force of which was equaled by the knowledge that no one else recognized it, not even, or especially, the one who possessed it" (1992, 209). As Ruby Dee said, "The author digs up for viewing deep secret thoughts, terrible yearnings and little-understood frustrations common to many of us. She says these are the gnawings we keep pushed back into the subconscious, unadmitted; but they must be worked on, ferreted up and out so we can breathe deeply, say loud and truly believe 'Black is beautiful.'" (1971, 319; Douglas 2006, 153). It is not only black readers who need to ferret out these subconscious "gnawings" and resist the master narratives that enforce them. If only as adolescents, most white readers can also identify with the "long hours [Pecola] sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret" (Morrison 1992, 45).

The ultimate secret in this context may be our seeming helplessness in the grip of fears generated by judging ourselves and others by appearance. "As Sartre pointed out, human relations revolve around the experience of 'the Look'" (Davis 1998, 28). This is one of those embarrassing facts of life, even more taboo to talk about than incest, a deep secret that is always between us but we feel we must keep from our consciousness. What is "gnawing" at us is not so much the secret of beauty as the fear of ugliness. Compare, for example, images of Jesus in our culture with Isaiah's famous prophecy: "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. . . . We hid as it were our faces from him."[16] If readers of *The Bluest Eye* were familiar with images of an ugly Jesus perhaps they could imagine even Pecola as a Christ figure; after all, she too "is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so [she] openeth not [her] mouth. . . . [She] was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was [she] stricken" (Isaiah 53: 6-8).

One of the reasons that we cannot even imagine an ugly Jesus is the assumption that the outside of a person reflects the inside. In western civilization, both Greek and Hebrew traditions at times identify a bodily stigma such as a mark and a scar as punishment for breaking the laws of the culture, as "a manifestation of an inner ugliness, a spiritual failure."[17] This equation of physical beauty with virtue is embedded in fairy tales as well as religious texts. Bessie Jones noticed that Pecola is a "composite of many fairy-tale heroines" or, rather, an

> ironical caricature. . . . She is the ugly duckling, but, unfortunately, she does not change into a swan. She is the abused and ill-treated step-child, but [she is not beautiful like Cinderella and] the abusive step-parents are ironically her own mother and father. The mirror into which she stares does not reassure her that she is the 'fairest of them all'. (Jones 1985, 27).

Indeed, as we have seen, "Long hours [Pecola] sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison 1992, 45).

Ultimately, on some level, this is the most powerful emotional response to the novel for most readers: fear of being rejected because of our appearance, abandoned by the group, left homeless. On the Hebrew Day of Atonement one of the two scapegoats is killed (as in Greece), but the other is banished to the wilderness, awakening this primordial fear of homelessness (Lev. xvi). George Yancey observed that within the text, being put outdoors signals a profound sense of ostracism. Indeed, it constitutes "the real terror of life." Capturing the factuality and finality of being outdoors, Claudia says, "But the concreteness of being outdoors, was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn't change, and outdoors is here to stay." So the sense of being outdoors is not just a spatial relationship; it also connotes an ontological stasis, a sense of nothingness (2000, 307).

Many psychotherapists believe that those who did not feel enough love and acceptance in the family of origin (who did?) experience this fear of "nothingness" on some level. This fear of being abandoned is so basic, I would suggest, that it may be detected even in what critics have called the "idyllic" Dick-and-Jane family "utopia." Most readers recognize that Morrison sabotages this text by "signifying on" it with the narrative that follows, especially as the "white text" descends into chaos with the disappearance of punctuation and, finally, spacing.[18] However, to my knowledge none have noticed that the subversion begins with the white-family primer itself. Perhaps because they are preoccupied with stereotypes and the phrase "They are very happy" (Morrison 1992, 3), readers have not consciously acknowledged that no family members respond to the question "Who will play with Jane?" One reader suggested that "this is the picture of the ideal American family which is held up as a model not only in the schools, but also in magazine advertisements, in the picture shows and on billboards" and concluded, "Where Mother and Father have time to play with Dick and Jane, Mother and Father do not even have time to talk to Claudia and Freida" (Jones 1985, 25-26). However, in Morrison's version, Jane is abandoned emotionally by her family. Whether or not they have the time (and there is no indication that they do), Jane's mother and father do *not* play with her; nor does the dog; even "the kitten will not play." Like so many families devoted to keeping up appearances, there may be a different reality behind the "very happy" smiling faces. Even the white, middle class myth may be one of alienation and abandonment: like Jane Eyre, this Jane may be an orphan within her own family. After all, the only one who will respond to Morrison's Jane

is a "friend" from outside the family. And that is how Pecola's story also ends: finally the only one who will play with her is an imaginary friend.

The fear of being abandoned that pervades the novel also surfaces in Pauline's feeling that because of her club foot "she never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged any place" (Morrison 1992, 111). These words epitomize the instinctive, primordial fear that because we have a stigma, if we don't look like "them," or do not belong for some other reason, we will be driven from the group, or worse. When a little chick is born with a spot of blood on it, for example, the hens (including its own mother) will often peck it to death. Because she is "ugly," adults in her own community say that Pecola would "be better off in the ground" (189-90). Ervin Goffman has demonstrated that "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances" (1963, 5-6; cf. Davis 29).

According to Aristotle, viewers identify with this fear in Greek tragedy because it is the misfortune of "someone just like ourselves" (1965, 48). Most readers can identify with some version of this fear of abandonment, if not with adolescent fears, at least with that fear of being abandoned by God, that "transcendental homelessness" that distinguishes modern fiction according to both Marxists (Lukacs, 1920, 41) and postmodernists (Miller 1963). From this perspective, I have argued that the family novels of the last two centuries revise Freud's traditional "Family Romances" (1908) to focus on the reader as well as the protagonist as the "orphan" driven by fear of abandonment to seek a more functional family (Bump 2003, 152-53).

The Bluest Eye belongs in this genre, but Pecola's need is greater than that of most of its other characters because she is doubly orphaned. She has two of the three kinds of stigmas defined by Goffman: the bodily stigmas of ugliness and femininity, and the tribal stigma of being an African American.[19] By connecting these two kinds of stigmas, Morrison enables white readers sensitive to their own physical imperfections to feel the tragedy of racism more deeply.

Morrison's "Afterword" begins with the basic question of the "beautiful" and "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (1992, 210), exemplified in Pauline's experience of the movies:

> Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. . . . She was

> never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen. . . . "Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. . . . When I had the second one, a girl [Pecola], I 'member I said I'd love it no matter what it looked like....But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly." (Morrison 1992, 122-26)

Our question is, can our emotional responses to Pecola's "ugliness" lead us to behave more ethically? A novel can elicit pity from us, but, as we have seen, that may not be the most useful emotional response to racism. What is? Is not love the primary alternative to fear? In Greek there are many words for love, but in English there is but one and in practice it often means little more than lust or "romance." In English, "compassion" may be a better word, as its root meaning is "to suffer with" and, as Stanford argues, "compassionate grief" is a more accurate translation than "pity" for Aristotle's account of tragedy. To feel compassionate grief for Pecola, to feel her pain, is to take the first step toward breaking out of the habits of racism and judging by appearance. However, to "suffer with" Pecola, or anyone else, one must have a "sympathetic imagination." Defective sympathetic imaginations are not confined to recognized sociopaths. Mr. Yacobowski, for example, "does not see [Pecola] because for him there is nothing to see" (Morrison 1992, 48). More to our point, "Her teachers always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her" (45). Unfortunately, as Adams and Cohen (1974) have shown, this is the way most teachers still respond to ugliness.

Thus our primary ethical questions become, How can we help ourselves and the Yacobowskis in our college literature classrooms see people like Pecola? and, How can we then imagine what it is like to be Pecola, to "suffer with" her, that is, to feel "compassion" for her? One way is to focus on the "Thing" that makes others "beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 1992, 74). Goffman reminds us that "the most fortunate of normals is likely to have his half-hidden failing, and for every little failing there is a social occasion when it will loom large" (1963, 127). What if teachers and students became more conscious of their own fear of ugliness? Virtually all readers, white as well as black, male as well as female, know that they do not have movie star beauty and thus fear judging by appearance. What if teachers and students could recall how they felt when they looked in the mirror after seeing movies, or after they were subjected to the stares of others in school? Would that not give some of them at least an opportunity to relate to Pecola?

Teaching "critical reading" offers one way to ease into this painful subject, especially if we focus on the pervasive commercialization of the "Thing" that makes others "beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 1992, 74). In addition to

movies and advertising, commodities such as cups, dolls, and candy carry the message in *The Bluest Eye*. The movie actress who has the most devastating effect on the girls' self-esteem is a child like them. Claudia and her sister bring "some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup" to Pecola. "She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was" (9). Later, feeling humiliation in her encounter with the eyes of Mr. Yacobski, Pecola turns to the candy she bought from him: "Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her. . . . To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy . . . . To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (50).

Ironically, white students can perhaps more easily recognize this tactic of selling "beauty" than African Americans. As Susan Willis has shown, what Morrison is documenting in her portrayal "of reified white characters is the consequence of the longer and deeper association with the commodity form that whites in our society have had as opposed to racial minorities. . . . Total immersion in commodities is a fairly recent historical phenomenon for the broad mass of Afro-Americans" (1989, 180-81). Claudia in fact resists such commodification, especially the usual Christmas present: "The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby-Doll. . . . I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 1992, 19). When Claudia removed the eyeballs, the adult protest was deeply emotional: "How strong was their outrage. Tears threatened to erase the aloofness of their authority. The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing preened in their voices" (21).

This outrage, fueled by centuries of discrimination, then becomes focused on the scapegoat. People in her own community make such comments as "'Bound to be the ugliest thing walking.' 'Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground'" (Morrison 1992, 189-90). Unfortunately, this experience of racism and judging by appearance outside of the family is also strongly reinforced by fear of abandonment within it. As Brooks Bouson puts it, Pecola "is a victim not only of racial shaming but also of her 'crippled and crippling family'." If the ultimate 'Enemy' that shames and traumatizes African Americans is the racist white society, there are also more immediate and intimate enemies within the African American community and family" (1999,

217; cf. Guerrero 1997, 29). Research has demonstrated that the average black family is healthier than the average white family; in fact, it can be argued that the modern definition of a functional family is moving in the direction already taken by the black family, toward a structure of relations transcending blood kin which can include gays and lesbians (Bump, 2003, 151–56).

However, as Morrison pointed out, Pecola's family was "unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's" (1992, 10). The shame of sexual abuse in that family is central, but so is the fear of ugliness, an emotion that is more pervasive in our culture and in readers. Ervin Goffman suggests that whether the family resists or reinforces the master narrative is crucial to the child's fear of abandonment because a

> pattern derives from the capacity of a family . . . to constitute itself a protective capsule for its young. Within such a family, a congenitally stigmatized child can be carefully sustained by means of information control. Self-belittling definitions of him are prevented from entering the charmed circle, while broad access is given to other conceptions held in the wider society, ones that lead the encapsulated child to see himself as a fully qualified ordinary human being. [However,] where the infantilely stigmatized manages to get through his early school years with some illusions left, the onset of dating or job-getting will often introduce the moment of truth. . . . if he is kept too long in the dark, then he will not be prepared for what is to happen to him and, moreover, may be informed about his condition by strangers who have no reason to take the time and care to present the facts in a constructive, hopeful light. (Goffman 1963, 32–33, 91)

This predicament and the emotions it generates is most obvious in Pecola's mother, Pauline. Morrison implies that her family of origin did not protect her from other people's fearful reactions to her bodily stigma. "Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (1992, 111). Although Cholly provided her with an alternative narrative to fight the "*Thing*" that makes others "beautiful, and not us" (74, cf. 115–16), she does not provide her own family with one:

> The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. . . . their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. . . . You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement: saw,

> in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes" they had said, "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (Morrison 1992, 38-9)

For the Breedloves, "ugliness" apparently became a "stigma that can be transmitted through lineages and equally contaminate all members of a family" (Goffman 1963, 4).

Of course, in this family the contamination is not equal. Here as well as in the outside world Pecola becomes the scapegoat: "'If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes'" (Morrison 1992, 46). As Yancey observed, "Pecola firmly believes that she is responsible for the irascible and violent behavior of her parents. . . . She knows herself as the degraded Other; she knows herself as a problem. This knowledge causes her to wish for her own disappearance: 'Please, God' she whispered into the palm of her hand, 'please let me disappear' (45)" (2000, 316). Fritz Fanon records a similar reaction:

> I am the slave not of an 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance. . . . already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am fixed. Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. . . . I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. (Fanon 1967, 116)

Like Ralph Ellison, Morrison makes visible the invisible, in her case not only discrimination but also that fear of ugliness that enables more readers to identify with this basic situation of racism.

We can follow her lead in almost any literature classroom. For example, the physical and tribal stigmas of appearance are also leitmotifs in canonical British as well as American literature. In my Victorian novel course, for example, just as Pecola feels inferior to Maureen Peale, Maggie seems ugly beside Lucy in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, and Jane knows she is not beautiful compared to the blond Georgianna in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. Jane is aware that *because* she is considered not pretty or handsome, her stepmother "could not love" her (1848, 13). To document what readers are feeling in response to passages such as this I have been citing the publications of critics, but other sources are available, such as student journals. For example, one of the servants states explicitly that "if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really can not care for such a little toad" (21). One of my students wrote that Jane "felt a great deal of physical inadequacy that was easy for me to relate to"; another was prompted to write about why "no one asked me out in high school" (Bump 1993, 132, 134). Heathcliff, in *Wuthering Heights*, presents similar teaching opportunities.

Comparing himself to Edgar Linton, he says "I wish I had light hair and fair skin" (Bronte 1972, 54). When Mr. Earnshaw introduces him into the household he says "you must e'en take it as a gift of God, though it's as dark almost as if it came from the devil" (39). In addition to his tribal stigma, a physical stigma, his facial expression, prompts instinctive hatred. A servant says that Heathcliff "looks an out-and-outer! . . . the villain scowls so plainly in his face, would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features?" (48-49).

I argue that *The Bluest Eye* conveys the fears, shames, and angers of a child who receives such messages as well as, or better than, *Jane Eyre* or *Wuthering Heights*, but does it succeed in Morrison's terms? Are readers "moved" as well as "touched"? Ruby Dee said, "To read the book . . . is to ache for remedy" (Dee 1971; cf. McKay 1988, 20). For some readers, one anodyne, if not cure, is the narration itself. Poetic prose like Morrison's can make pain manageable. Her writing can be to us what Cholly's whistling was to Pauline, and what her mother's songs were to Claudia: "If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. . . . Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison 1992, 25-26). Is this the kind of "play with language" that Christian identified as the equivalent of theorizing by "people of color" (1987, 52)? Where a theoretician might talk about bibliotherapy or discuss how "language becomes a means of catharsis;"[20] Morrison demonstrates how literature heals.

Humor, of course, also helps make the pain sufferable, as when the author recreates the whores' conversations: "'my mama taught me never to cuss'. 'Did she teach you not to drop your drawers? China asked. 'Didn't have none', said Marie, 'Never saw a pair of drawers till I was fifteen. . . . My white lady gave me some old ones of hers. I thought they was some kind of stocking cap. I put it on my head when I dusted. When she saw me, she liked to fell out'" (Morrison 1992, 54). Laughter can be an important part of a healing narrative: when Pauline first met Cholly "she had not known there was so much laughter in the world" (116). Yet the humor does not save Pauline, Cholly, or their daughter, Pecola.

However, Claudia, the protoreader, is able to keep her sanity, partly because as an emotionally literate, adult, third-person narrator she tells the story of their childhood simultaneously identifying with and separating from the dilemmas they faced.[21] Becoming the narrator of her own life, master of the therapeutic "play of language," Claudia escapes Pecola's fate.

Yet I would suggest that the novel also succeeds because the representation of Pecola enables us to feel compassionate grief, a far more profound response than the distancing feeling of contempt associated with the mod-

ern sense of "pity." Admittedly, it is often remarked that Pecola has no voice in the story. Most readers believe that the two voices at the end are hers, but the voices are trapped within her psyche, apparently, and thus it is assumed that she does not speak to another person. But she does communicate to the reader, who is allowed to hear her stream of consciousness, and thus her "play of language." Indeed, Pecola's final mono/dialogue is one of the most startling examples of the power of literature to engage and stretch the reader's sympathetic imagination. The reader of *The Bluest Eye* is made to experience the internal reality of someone who at this point would probably be labeled "schizophrenic." To enable the reader to experience the suffering of such a victim of racism and fear of ugliness, from the inside, is a significant ethical accomplishment, one that might well effect a change in the reader's sensitivity to others.

Moreover, we don't merely identify with Pecola: the narrative technique implicates us in what happened to her. Morrison said that the keeping of a secret between us stimulates curiosity and creates an "intimacy between the reader and the page" (1992 213). The initial narration by a child "gives the reader pause about whether the voice of children can be trusted at all or is more trustworthy than an adult's. The reader is thereby protected from a confrontation too soon with the painful details, while simultaneously provoked into a desire to know them" (213). By the time the reader knows them, the crisis is "a social disruption with tragic individual consequences in which the reader, as part of the population of the text, is implicated" (214). The novel succeeds because we identify not only with Pecola but also with Claudia when she says, "All of our waste . . . we dumped on her and. . . she absorbed" (205). Many of us know that at some time in our lives we too have made scapegoats of those who did not meet "our" standards of the "beautiful."

Because Morrison makes the issue not only racism but also our perception of ugliness in general, we know that the problem of the "ugly little girl asking for beauty" (1992, 174) is also our problem. Every time we look in the mirror and see that we are not as beautiful as a movie star, not as beautiful as the television, magazine, and billboard ads tell us we should be, we feel the fear of rejection and abandonment, and know that we have experienced a little of the emotional pain of the *Thing* that destroyed Pecola. Suffering with her, knowing that pain consciously, *feeling* it, acknowledging it openly and directly, most of us will be less likely to inflict it on others, and more likely to take action against those who do.

This is particularly important for us as teachers. As the presence of the Dick and Jane primer in the novel indicates, education in particular is being interrogated. By focusing on feelings, Christian, Morrison, hooks, Lorde, and many others challenge not just the way multiculturalism is taught today, but ultimately the fear of emotion throughout education, especially in the

churches of reason, the research universities. By acknowledging in our own classrooms the fears in this novel and in ourselves, ethical emotive criticism can help us overcome this institutional fear and, more importantly, carry the battle against racism to a wider audience.

Notes

[1] Most readers of *The Bluest Eye* (1970) recognize that by following the Dick-and-Jane grade-school primer with the narrative of the Breedloves Morrison challenges especially the teaching of reading **(**Kuenz 1993, 423; Blumenthal 2007, 118**).** Concerning the writing of some theorists, Christian wrote: "As a student of literature, I am appalled by the sheer ugliness of the language, its lack of clarity, its unnecessarily complicated sentence constructions, its lack of pleasurableness, its alienating quality. It is the kind of writing for which composition teachers would give a freshman a resounding F" (Christian 1987, 56).

[2] Because "emotion" has come to mean an agitation of mind *or* feeling, "emotive" may be the best name for this new literary criticism, especially because it is a term recently used to push the boundaries of ethnic scholarship (Pulido 2004). Jennifer Edbauer (2005) and Ilene Crawford (2002) use the word "affect" but that word for some readers connotes psychological theory instead of feeling. The word "feeling," on the other hand, is closely related to bodily sensations, especially the sense of touch. In psychology the word sometimes explicitly excludes thought; thus it too would be inappropriate for literary criticism that integrates thought and feeling.

[3] In 2002 Michalinos Zembylas cited research on emotion "in virtually all of the disciplines, with philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, and anthropology taking the lead" (187). In 2003, "Getting Emotional" was the cover story in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Scott McLemee noted that "The study of feelings, once the province of psychology, is now spreading to . . . literature, and other fields. . . . producing a body of work that regularly crosses the line between the humanities and the social sciences." Outside the academy, Daniel Goleman (1995) demonstrated the crucial role of emotional intelligence as we move into the twenty-first century.

[4] Aristotle, "On the Art of Poetry" (Trans. T. S. Dorsch, 1965)—hereafter cited in the text. Wordsworth focused on the poet's feelings, but added, "I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings" (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 1802).

[5] Wimsatt, 1954; "discussing the emotional impact of literature was long a taboo of professional literary study . . . deplored as mere 'impressionism' even after the New Critics began seeming old-fashioned" (McLemee 2003). In *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler claims that the emotions that "reader-oriented critics invoke are generally cognitive rather than affective: not feeling shivers along the spine [but] struggling with an irresolvable ambiguity" (1982, p. 39). Culler fails to account for Bleich (1975) and Tompkins (1977), among others. In 1987, as we have seen, Christian lamented that emotive knowledge was being ignored in "The Race for Theory," a complaint echoed by Neal Oxenhandler (1988).

[6] For reader response to style see Fish 1970; Nussbaum 1988; Burke 2001. For student emotions in the college classroom see Bleich (1975), Tompkins (1977, 1987), Brand (1980, 1989), Steig (1989), Berman (1994), and Bump (2000). For feelings of fictional characters see Novitz, (1980, 1987) and Feagin (1988, 1996). In 1997 Mullan returned to traditional scholarship on the relationship between fiction and sympathy and James Phelan briefly revived emotive reader-centered criticism in a reading of Morrison's *Beloved* (1997, 241; 2005). In 2001, the subject of *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the 'Death of the Subject'* (Tirada) was finally addressed, but the book remained focused on abstraction. Eve Sedgwick observed that "'people in queer studies and feminism [addressed emotion] in terms of 'the body,' but that, too, tended to turn into more-abstract discourse'" (cited by McLemee 2003).

[7] See Cvetkovich (2003), Sedgwick (2003); for structures of feeling see Matthews (2001); Zembylas (2002); Paster et al (2002); and Edbauer (2005). For recent interest in emotions see also Opdahl (2002), Hogan (2003), Alteiri (2003, 2004), Schaub (2004), Eiselein (2004), and Rokotnitz (2007).

[8] Mara Scanlon has demonstrated recently in this periodical why we need criticism to be ethical (2007, 2-4). For research on sympathy see Steig (1989), Novitz (1987), Feagin (1988), Marshall (1988).

[9] See D. Hume (1740, 369); Shelley (1821, 485-56); Bate (1946, 132-41); Goleman (1995, 106, 108); Storey (1996, 103) and Tyrell (1997, 11-12) Degler protests, "If we only pity, then we can hide behind empathy and say, 'isn't that shame?' rather than ask 'What does this say about me?'" (2006, 211). However, the sympathetic imagination is not to be confused with *Einfuhlung*, that "empathy" that consists of reading into the person subjective feelings aroused by her in the observer (Bate 1945).

[10] Morrison 1992, 15. Emotional knowledge is but one aspect of what might be called the knowledge of the body, "a primal form of understanding" (Rokotnitz 2007, 283) related to the sympathetic imagination. Goleman (1995) adopts Peter Salovey's definition of emotional intelligence which subsumes Howard Gardner's earlier theory of multiple intelligences, including the interpersonal, intrapsychic, spatial, kinesthetic, and musical.

[11] A family emotional atmosphere "that, in turn, influences the emotional functioning of each person. It is analogous to the gravitational field of the solar system, where each planet and the sun, by virtue of their mass, contribute gravity to the field and are, in turn, regulated by the field they help create. One cannot `see' gravity, nor can one `see' the emotional field. The presence of gravity and the emotional field can be inferred, however, by the predictable ways planets and people behave in reaction to one another" (Kerr 1988, 54-55).

[12] For instance, there is no mention of emotive or even reader-response criticism in the recent survey, "Morrison and the critical community" (Raynor and Butler 2007). Morrison's stated preference for "simple sentences where the reader is invited in with his or her own emotion" is cited in the survey, but the ensuing discussion is only about the "simple sentences"—not the reader's emotions (178). Similarly, none of the twenty-one essays in *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Toni*

Morrison (1997) focuses primarily on emotions in the text or in the reader. Admittedly, Carolyn Denard states that "good literature should elicit passionate response" and that "some guilt-ridden or angry revelations are healthy and necessary," but she wants the students to "move beyond these emotional responses to get at the larger message of the novel" (43-44, 46, 40). Kathryn Earle found that "the prospect of discussing the subject with students who might respond with hurt, anger, or scorn was *disabling*" (29 italics added), though she argues that it is from our "inability to find an outlet for our anger that the novel derives its power" (1997, 32).

[13] Bjork (1992, 32;) see Earle (1997, 32); Hedin (1992, 49, 50); Bouson (1999, 230).

[14] Eve Sedgwick's scholarship, for example, is based on Silvan Tomkins's "small set of affects (basic combinations of feeling and expression) that appear to be built into to the human nervous system" (McLemee 2003). For Thomkins, shame is the source of individual identity.

[15] See Matus (1998), Bouson (1999), Nathanson (1992, 463), Crawford (2000, 68), Scott (2006).

[16] King James version—hereafter cited in the text. "There are at least eleven places in the NT in which this chapter or portions of it are formally or informally cited and applied to Jesus (Matt. 8:17; Mark 15:28; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32, 33; Romans 10:16; 15:21; and 1 Peter 2:22, 24, 25)."Yet even in this long commentary on this section of Isaiah, I found only one acknowledgment of ugliness: "The Babylonian Talmud 13 in Sanhedrin 98b states that the Messiah was the leprous one that bore our sicknesses" (David R. Brewer, 1996),

[17] Davis (1998, 40n;) see also Crawfurd (1914), Goffman (1963.) Of course, in the case of the scapegoat Messiah, there is no "spiritual failure" because the sins are those of others.

[18] Blumenthal (2007, 118), Bjork **(**1992, 32), Otten (1989, 8)**,** Suryani (2007, 13), Ferguson (2007, 24), Douglas (2006, 145). Mayberry, (2007, notices that "Dick is never called on to play" 16).

[19] Goffman (1963, 4), the third stigma is blemish of character. Otten (1989) acknowledges the connection between racism and ugliness in the novel: "even the black community has allowed itself to be corrupted by a simplistic notion that devalues human beings solely on condition of their seeming ugliness. In such a perverse system, blackness is aligned with ugliness, and expunging it becomes the basis for acceptability" (12).

[20] Holloway and Demetrakopoulos (1987, 39). I have frequently used the term "bibliotherapy": 1993, 1989, 1990, 2000. Dawes (2004) and others discuss literature as pathology.

[21] See Carmean (1993, 27,30), Bjork (1992, 54), Harris (1991, 15), Bouson (1999, 230), Bump (2003, 163). Rokontnitz (2007) demonstrates that Claudia is also saved by imitating her mother.

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