Toni Morrison's argument with the Other: Irony, metaphor, and whiteness

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TONI MORRISON'S ARGUMENT WITH THE OTHER:
IRONY, METAPHOR, AND WHITENESS

A Project
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ABSTRACT

Black people, and blackness as a general symbol, has traditionally occupied a marginal or disadvantaged position in American literature, as opposed to representations of white people and whiteness as a general symbol. Morrison's fiction in effect reverses this representation and positions white people in the position of the Other. This switch allows Morrison to focus on her black subjects, while forcing white readers to experience the effects of being positioned as Other.

Morrison's fiction utilizes irony, metaphor, stereotyping, pronoun usage, and argumentum ad hominem to position her white characters as Other. At times these rhetorical strategies are employed to position whites as an absolute Other to be feared and avoided. At other times these tools are employed to position white characters, as well as white culture, within a master narrative reflecting Western values that are sometimes incongruent with traditional African-American values.

Morrison's fiction also utilizes white characters to confront similarities between both communities in an attempt to uncover possible sites of reconciliation. Through this interplay of difference and similarity, Morrison's argument with the Other takes shape.
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CHAPTER ONE

In Toni Morrison’s novel Sula a plague of robins invades the Ohio community of Medallion. To the residents of Medallion, the robins foreshadow a clear sign of impending evil. Far from fearing the unknown evil, no matter what that evil may be, the community understands that evil must be confronted and survived. As the narrator states:

The purpose of evil was to survive it and they determined (without ever knowing they had made up their minds to do it) to survive floods, white people, tuberculosis, famine, and ignorance. They knew anger well but not despair, and they didn’t stone sinners for the same reason they didn’t commit suicide — it was beneath them. (90)

Included within the mix of the survivable evils of floods, tuberculosis, famine, and ignorance are white people. Morrison has positioned white people as equivalent to some of the worst internal and external evils that can buffet the African-American community. White people, like all natural calamities, engender feelings of anger within the community, an anger that galvanizes the community against any outside threat. By positioning white people as an evil to be survived, Morrison is making a rhetorical move that effectively places them in the marginalized position of racial Other: a position that effectively
silences white characters unless their speech supports stereotypical portraits of racist behavior. This is not to say that Morrison’s depiction of white behavior in her novels is unfair or without factual evidence. But it is to say that by relegating whites to the marginalized spaces around the stories, white people, in effect, become othered by a community that has itself traditionally occupied that space in American literature.

In this foundational chapter I will examine the rhetorical underpinnings Morrison utilizes in positioning white people as Other. I will be using the same notion of otherness that Barbara Babcock employs when she asserts that “what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central” (qtd. In McGowan 122). Babcock goes on to state that a society’s representation of the Other “is not simply a powerful image but fundamentally constitutive of the categorical sets through which we live and make sense of the world” (122). In addition to Babcock’s notion that understanding the other is central to making sense of the world in which we live, I want to expand the definition of Other to include John McGowan’s idea that “The other possesses energies and potential that identity both needs to survive and views as dangerous, always in need of being kept under strict control” (122). I will also look at how
irony and metaphor can be used to isolate and demonize a specific group, and how stereotyping and pronoun usage can work to marginalize or negate a group's social standing.

Toni Morrison's novels explore, among other things, how oppression can affect the fabric and soul of individuals as well as society. In Morrison's work, oppression is not reduced to a common denominator, but oppression can be perpetrated by blacks against blacks as in The Bluest Eye, by whites against blacks as in Beloved, or by blacks against innocent whites as in Song of Solomon. Therefore it would be a mistake to assume that Morrison includes whites in her work for the sole purpose of oppressing her black characters. Morrison instead uses her white characters as a type of difference, a difference that helps to define issues of self-identity, racial and cultural boundaries, and assimilation in the black communities represented in her fiction. But Morrison also utilizes whites to confront similarities between communities in an attempt to uncover possible sites for reconciliation. Through this interplay of difference and similarity, Morrison sparingly introduces white characters into her novels.

The development of self-identity is in many ways a
function of difference or otherness. To understand and develop a self-identity, one must struggle with core issues of personal character, but one must also understand who one is not. As Stephen Harold Riggens says,

"For a person to develop a self-identity, he or she must generate discourses of both difference and similarity and must reject and embrace specific identities. The external Other should thus be considered as a range of positions within a system of difference." (4)

This system of difference that Riggens speaks of is central to understanding how Morrison’s African-American characters negotiate issues of self-identity in white America. The "external Other" represents others outside of the individual self or "internal Other." In the case of Morrison’s characters, the external Other is represented by white culture, an external Other that views black Americans themselves as Other. Therefore Morrison’s black characters must seek to develop self-identity within a hostile environment dominated by an external Other that discounts their very existence. This difficult task of self-discovery is discussed by Sidney J. Blatt and Shula Shichman:

"Struggles to achieve separation, definition, and independence from controlling, intrusive, punitive, excessively critical, and judgmental figures are expressed in conflicts"
around the management and containment of affect, especially aggression directed toward others and the self.

Morrison's African-American characters struggle to achieve a separation from "controlling, judgmental, excessively critical figures" (white characters and white culture as a whole), while at the same time managing to erect workable self-identities that don't erupt into aggressive acts against Others or the very selves they are attempting to define.

Faced with a hostile environment, African-Americans are forced to confront the Other on the Other's terms. This unequal power relationship leaves the subordinated group with far fewer social options, far fewer opportunities to explore meaning and direction in the development of self-identity. But the dominant group also faces challenges where the Other is concerned. The main weapon in the arsenal of an oppressor is fear. This fear is perpetrated upon the weaker by the stronger to keep the weaker in a subordinated position. At the same time a fear of the subordinated can act upon the perpetrator when little is known about the lives of the oppressed.

The first contact between the opposing "Others" can lead to imaginative distortions within each group. Jacques Derrida speaks of these encounters,
Absolute fear would then be the first encounter of the other as other: as other than I and as other than itself. I can answer the threat of the other as other (than I) by transforming it into another (than itself), through altering it in my imagination, my fear or my desire. (Grammatology 277)

This notion of transforming the fear of the Other through altering it is important in understanding how white people function in Morrison’s fiction. While the outer workings of a culture may be available for public view, the rituals, customs, and inner workings of a culture remain a mystery to those either unable or unwilling to understand them. This leaves room for the imagination to fill in the blanks. The imagination is free to exaggerate stereotypical fears the Other represents, free to condemn customs and rituals that conflict with accepted norms, and free to project forbidden desires upon the mysterious Other who remains unknown. This is one function that whites serve in Morrison’s novels. White characters also serve as a model of extreme difference for comparative purposes.

Within the range of positions within a system of difference lies the complete Other. Instead of seeking to develop self-identity through “discourses of both difference and similarity,” the complete Other seeks to develop self-identity through the discovery of opposites. John McGowan examines this type of difference: “Diffe’rence
Derrida's term) is completely other, but the goal is not to seek some union with that otherness but to affirm the endless play of difference that the completely other guarantees" (101). By not seeking union with the extreme Other, one can clearly define the scope and boundaries of one's image of self. During slavery, white Americans, no matter their social or financial status, could always define their place in society against the backdrop of an enslaved people. In a sense, whites were provided with a guarantee of never reaching the bottom of the well because black Americans occupied that station. According to Morrison,

Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. (Playing 38)

The option of complete difference provides opportunities for clear delineation between ideas, culture, and actions. Derrida argues that traditional philosophy has always privileged the concept of the same: "the aim of philosophical thought has been to reveal the essential characteristics that two things hold in common" (McGowan 1991). In other words, sameness represents the ideal or aim of rational man's attempt at unification. Derrida
would instead suggest that

The other, as other than self, the other that opposes self-identity, is not something that can be detected and disclosed within a philosophical space and with the aid of a philosophical lamp. The other precedes philosophy and necessarily invokes and provokes the subject before any genuine questioning can begin. (McGowan 93-94)

Derrida’s Other opposes self-identity. This opposition in effect reverses the notion that sameness is the preferred route to identity formation. Conversely, complete difference precedes sameness and, by questioning difference, the initial footings for the self are secured. In this same sense Morrison, at times, preserves complete otherness to illustrate core differences that are intrinsic to the nature of her African-American characters.

While complete difference is important in understanding how Morrison uses white characters in her fiction, there are numerous situations where whites serve to blur the lines between the two groups. Be they black or white, self-identities are dependent upon both communities. As McGowan says:

The included and the excluded, the same and its other, are revealed as dependent on one another within the larger dynamics of the constitution of identities within a social whole that privileges some identities over others. (121)
Traditionally, whites have assumed the position of the included, while blacks have occupied the position of the excluded. In Morrison's fiction this situation is reversed, so that black people are the central focus, and whites are on the periphery. But despite this reversal of positioning, whites remain a powerful part of the political, economic, and social whole and, therefore, an integral component of the construction of self within the black community. Morrison suggests that "The contemplation of this black presence [in American literature] is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination" (Playing 5). I would suggest that the same situation holds true for understanding Morrison's fiction, but in her fiction it is the contemplation of white presence that should not be allowed to "hover at the margins of the literary imagination."

When the lines begin to blur between two groups that consider each other strange or different, the emotions that are stirred can lead to unique revelations about personal identity. Julia Kristeva explores the conflicting emotions that encounters with the Other can provoke:

Strange indeed is the encounter with the other — whom we perceive by means of sight, hearing, smell, but do not 'frame' within our consciousness. The
other leaves us separate, incoherent; even more so, he can make us feel that we are not in touch with our own feelings, that we reject them or, on the contrary, that we refuse to judge them — we feel 'stupid,' we have 'been had.'

Also strange is the experience of the abyss separating me from the other who shocks me — I do not even perceive him, perhaps he crushes me because I negate him. Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries. I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure. I feel 'lost,' 'indistinct,' 'hazy.' The uncanny strangeness allows for many variations: they all repeat the difficulty I have in situating myself with respect to the other and keep going over the course of identification-projection that lies at the foundation of my reaching autonomy. (187)

Just as Kristeva clearly points to the difficulties associated with confrontations between "Others," the conflicting emotions of simultaneous associative and disassociative feelings are evident in Morrison's fiction. Her characters, in general, reject whites as foreign, unable to bridge the abyss that separates black and white. But this does not negate the feelings of self-identification that both cultures owe to the other. The road to personal autonomy for Morrison's black characters is riddled with contradictions that, for the most part, are
provoked by confrontations between the search for identity in a white-dominated culture and reconciling feelings of identification with that same white culture.

One strategy Morrison's characters employ is to examine whiteness from a critical point of view. By repositioning white people as the excluded, Morrison not only reverses traditional literary and social roles but also allows for a critical examination of whiteness. Thinking critically about whiteness is not a typical approach when considering traditional American literature. However thinking critically about whiteness is a skill many blacks utilize when considering cultural or literary issues. bell hooks explains that

Many of them [white people] are shocked that black people think critically about whiteness because racist thinking perpetuates the fantasy that the Other who is subjugated, who is subhuman, lacks the ability to comprehend, to understand, to see the working of the powerful. (Representations of Whiteness 41)

When the positions of the excluded and the included are exchanged, as they are in Morrison's fiction, white characters are situated as subjects who are subjugated, subhuman, unable to comprehend, incapable of understanding, and unwilling to see into the workings of the powerful.
This rhetorical move places white readers in the compromising position of justifying their own relation with the Other. Morrison's white readers, perhaps for the first time, encounter authentic black life from the position of outsiders, and not benign outsiders but menacing outsiders.

Positioning a group as other can also be viewed from a purely textual point of view. Simple shifts in pronoun usage can turn a diverse group into a narrowly defined Other. Mary Louise Pratt speaks of this type of othering:

The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective 'they,' which is distilled even further into an iconic 'he' (the standardized adult male specimen). This abstracted 'he'/‘they’ is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything 'he' is or does not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pregiven custom or trait. Through this discourse, encounters with an Other can be textualized or processed as enumerations of such traits. (139)

By reducing an entire society to a select group of negative traits, an author can effectively silence individual voices within the target group. Turning individuals into traits or customs denies opposing viewpoints, while at the same time allowing an author to use the other to serve the needs of the majority. Morrison addresses this issue as it relates to black presence in white literature: "They [blacks] provide paradox, ambiguity; they strategize
omissions, repetitions, disruptions, polarities, reifications, violence” (Playing in the Dark 66). And while Morrison is speaking about black’s positioning in white literature, this is a main function of white presence in Morrison’s fiction as well.

Morrison also employs pronouns to erect boundaries between black and white characters. By not allowing most white characters to possess individual names or speak what might be construed as a counter-discourse, Morrison limits any potential opposition. She in effect applies a limiting range of voice to a group that has traditionally held full sway in public discourse. Riggins explores these boundaries built with pronouns: “Expressions that are the most revealing of the boundaries separating Self and Other are inclusive and exclusive pronouns and possessives such as we and they, us and them, and ours and theirs” (8). Utilizing pronouns as a means of identification disallows Morrison’s white characters the right to name themselves as individuals. As Riggins suggests, “To name one’s Self is a fundamental human right that frequently is denied to Others.” He goes on to say that “Members of a ‘we’ group may be identified by personal names more often than Others, who are identified anonymously according to occupation,
age, or some other social status” (8). Morrison uses pronouns in a reductive sense, limiting white characters to stereotypical representations that only serve to reenforce her black characters’ notions of whites as an opposing Other.

Just as pronouns can be used in a reductive sense to limit a group’s identity, stereotypical representations of a group can likewise serve to reduce an entire population to preconceived notions established by an author, opposing group, or even a group dedicated to helping a specific improve their condition. If a group’s identity can be controlled through stereotype and repetition, then the target group's characteristics can be fixed in the reader’s mind as directed by authorial intention or prejudice. Homi K. Bhabha examines this discursive strategy in the context of representations in colonial literature,

Fixity, as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always ‘in place’, already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated ... as if the essential duplicity of the
Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. (66)

While Bhabha is speaking directly about stereotypes involving minorities, his points are universal in their implications. All ethnic groups tend, as a social defensive mechanism, to resort to stereotypes to explain the differences that exist between cultures. The very complexity of the world precludes a complete understanding of the myriad cultural rituals that at any one time are being practiced. Therefore diverse and complex cultures are reduced to a series of easily understood distortions by those outside the given culture. This is of course not to say that all stereotypes are without foundation, but to say that while slave traders represent the worst of humanity, they just as certainly don't represent the whole of humanity. And it would be an injustice to paint an entire people with the evils committed by a few. In this sense, stereotypes represent a discursive strategy that relies equally upon truth as well as myth.

Stereotypes depend upon paradoxical relations between the target group and the originator of the stereotypical representation. Stereotypes depend upon a certain amount of known information about the target group to be effective. Stereotypes that depend only on exaggerated or
"cartoonish" representations almost always lack any sense of reality. But when reality is mixed with fantasy, stereotypes give those predisposed to such prejudices ample support for their positions. bell hooks states that "Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real" ("Representations" 44). The trait being stereotyped (be it real or a substitution for what is real) is then repeated until a feeling of authenticity replaces any sense of credulity. As Riggens argues, "The repetitious nature of stereotypes should not be mistaken for a sign that they are correct depictions of reality. Stereotypes in general, whatever group they are applied to, are repetitious and contradictory" (9). It is therefore incumbent upon readers of fiction and non-fiction works to question stereotypical representations that present an entire people as a homogenous whole.

Stereotyping, as generally understood in the United States, reflects the majority culture's misrepresentation of minority groups. Rarely are minority misrepresentations of the dominant group explored. This imbalance is quite natural. The dominate group, by the very nature of its dominance, tends to be less affected by efforts of minority
groups to stereotype their actions or personal traits. But it is a mistake to assume that multiple stereotypes of the majority do not exist, or that these stereotypes are without consequence. These consequences may not be as Riggins suggests:

The rhetoric of Othering [stereotyping] dehumanizes and diminishes groups, making it easier for victimizers to seize land, exploit labor, and exert control while minimizing the complicating emotions of guilt and shame. (9)

The very nature of minority stereotyping is oppressive. If an entire population can be reduced to an image which dehumanizes and diminishes, then it becomes easier to justify a paternalistic and controlling posture. Guilt and shame are assuaged through a certainty of one's superior knowledge and position in society. Minorities are seldom in a power position to assert such control so, consequentially, a majority population tends not to suffer economic or social disadvantages at the hands of minority stereotyping. But when thoughtful members of a majority population are presented with a distorted image of themselves as seen through the eyes of the minority, these stereotypes can be examined, truths can be admitted, fallacies can be unmasked, and possible sites of reconciliation can be addressed when all stereotypes are
exposed and openly discussed.

Stereotypical representations of whites as seen through the eyes of blacks have received far less attention than the reverse, and this in itself is an affirmation of the need to openly acknowledge their existence. Black stereotypes of whites are inextricably entwined with white stereotypes of blacks. In a discussion of Lorraine Hansberry, bell hooks examines this connection:

*Stereotypes black folks maintain about white folks are not the only representations of whiteness in the black imagination. They emerge primarily as responses to white stereotypes of blackness. Lorraine Hansberry argues the black stereotypes of whites emerge as a trickle-down process of white stereotypes of blackness, where there is the projection onto an Other all that we deny about ourselves. ("Confronting..." 43)*

Likewise, stereotypes whites maintain about blackness emerge out of a sometimes strong desire to possess, or destroy, the mysteries that are believed to be contained within stereotypical representations. Or as Bhabha says, "that otherness which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity" (67). The differences that stereotypes seek to simplify are paradoxically a mixture of self-love and self-loathing. This untenable
mixture works against individual self-identity as well as group interaction. The "fantasy of origin and identity" needs to be demystified before stereotypes can be reconciled with actuality. The distance between the stereotypical representations offered by intellectual laziness can be countered by acknowledging, as bell hooks says, that "they [stereotypes] are an invention, a pretense that one knows when the steps that would make real knowing possible cannot be taken or are not allowed" (44). Invention and pretense need to be sacrificed, even in the face of political or racial opposition, before real reconciliation can be approached.

The Other occupies a difficult position, reduced to a marginalized position, unable or unwilling to fully participate in the mainstream. Authors such as Morrison are able to expose the devastating effects that being positioned as Other can have on identity formation. Through both her fictive and academic writings, Morrison illustrates how marginalized people suffer under oppressive conditions perpetrated by the white majority. But Morrison is also willing to (re)position whites in the role of Other within her fictional world, thus turning the tables on her white readers, allowing them to argue and question their representation and to examine personal prejudices and
attitudes toward those who are not I. And while stereotyping and pronoun usage are key rhetorical strategies employed by Morrison in positioning whites as Other, she also employs—in a more subtle fashion—irony and metaphor to reposition whites in the less familiar role of Other.

Morrison uses both irony and metaphor to (re)position whites in her fiction. Linda Hutcheon defines irony as "oppositional" or "counter-discourse in its ability to contest dominate habits of mind and expression" (52). Hutcheon goes on to claim that

For those positioned within a dominate ideology, such a contesting might be seen as abusive or threatening; for those marginalized and working to undo that dominance, it might be subversive or transgressive in the newer, positive senses that those words have taken on in recent writing about gender, race, class, and sexuality. (52)

This notion of irony as subversive lends itself to works by authors who are seeking to challenge dominant ideas firmly entrenched within society. The ironic subversion that Hutcheon speaks of is not covert in nature, but a rhetorical method that openly seeks to question and undermine long-established ideas. Traditional understandings of irony, or "the old definition of irony — saying one thing and giving to understand the contrary — is
superceded; irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations" (Muecke 31). Morrison's use of ironic reversal through positioning her white characters as Other, and through her figurations of whiteness in general, invite this "endless series of subversive interpretations." And as Hutcheon suggests in the above quote, the subversive interpretations that emerge from ironic reversals of positioning, or discourse that counters dominant thinking, have taken on a more positive sense in that white readers, being positioned as targets of irony, can participate in their own self-construction.

Irony, when employed as oppositional, can call into question entrenched cultural assumptions. By undermining a society's agreed upon identity, an author can lead readers through a questioning of individual actions and beliefs. In the case of a minority writer writing for a predominantly majority audience, "irony can and does function tactically in the service of a wide range of political positions, legitimating or undercutting a wide variety of interests" (Hutcheon 10). When Morrison reduces all white people to a few stereotypical representations, most of her white readers will naturally answer back, "Not me." If interpretation ends at this point, if a white
reader simply claims innocence by virtue of absence, then
the undercutting nature of Morrison's irony will be lost on
that reader. Irony requires the reader to look past the
surface layer or easy interpretation to the political
positions that the author intends to expose. According to
Muecke,

In deceptions there is an appearance
that is proffered and a reality that is
withheld, but in irony the real meaning
is meant to be inferred either from
what the ironist says or from the
context in which he says it; it is
withheld only in the weak sense that it
is not explicit or not meant to be
immediately apprehensible. If among an
ironist's audience there are those who
are not meant to understand, then what
we have in relation to them is a hoax
or an equivocation, not an irony,
though their non-apprehension may well
enhance the pleasure
of the irony for the real audience.
(36-37)

Morrison's irony is not "immediately apprehensible." The
racial and political positions she explores in her fiction
are intended to challenge long-held beliefs in American
society. One must look past seemingly stereotypical
representations of whiteness to experience her ironic
intentions. And if there are those among her readership
that are not meant to understand her ironic reversals, or
are unwilling to do so, the ironic nature of her
positioning of white characters is not lost but simply
enhanced. 

Ironic that aims to subvert dominant beliefs is effective when the intended target of irony chooses to approach a fictive work with the thought of pushing beyond surface or easy interpretations. Booth suggests that

What we do with a work, or what it does with us, will depend on our decision, conscious or unconscious, about whether we are asked by it to push through its confusions to some final point of clarity or to see through it to a possible infinite series of further confusions. (241)

To understand white people's functions in Morrison's novels, and how irony functions to destabilize dominant ideologies, one must push through ready-made answers and attempt to reassemble confusions created through being repositioned in unfamiliar roles. If a reader fails, or is unwilling, to move beyond initial assumptions of authorial intentions, then his or her surface reading will be limited to those initial cliched assumptions.

Attempting to guess an author's ironic intentions can distort meaning. But at the same time, an understanding of an author's personal background can help in constructing an ironic interpretation. Booth contends that some ironies

...are intended, deliberately created by human beings to be heard or read and understood with some precision by other human beings; they are not mere openings, provided unconsciously, or
accidental statements allowing the confirmed pursuer of ironies to read them as reflections against the author. (5)

If all ironies are created to be understood by all readers, then intention is a moot point. When intention is unquestioned, it then becomes wise to understand an author's background on issues when interpreting ironic meaning. Foucault, on the other hand, claims that an author's intentions bear little upon interpretation, that an author's work is not a "majestic unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject who intends" (55). For Foucault an author's ironic intentions are either secondary to the interpreter's intentions or completely useless for interpretation. This approach allows the interpreter to free himself from the burden of uncovering authorial intention and move toward an interpretation based upon his cognitive abilities in conjunction with a wide array of supporting data.

Intention is further complicated when audience is considered. An author may intend to attack a certain audience with a stinging series of ironic situations, but if that audience simply misses the point or choose not to care, the ironies fail. Other problems may exist as well: "The intended audience, for instance, may not end up being the actual one; it may reject the ironic meaning, or find
it inappropriate or objectionable in some way; it may simply choose not to see irony in a given utterance" (Hutcheon 123). In the case of an author such as Morrison, white readers may miss entirely any ironic situations that initially posture an attack mode. Black readers may immediately pick up on culturally sensitive ironies. Latino or Asian readers may read their own cultural significance into situations that Morrison may have intended or not intended. The result of trying to decipher myriad combinations of authorial intention to multiple readers interpretations is an untenable task. The complexities attached to intention vs. ironic interpretation have led Hutcheon to state that "given my interests and tastes, I admit that I may be prone to seeing irony in places where not everyone might. This is not something either to be lamented or to be proud of: it is merely to be lived with" (123). Being careful not to over-interpret Morrison's ironic intentions concerning her white characters, I will use any clues she has provided in interviews or in her professional writings, and as Hutcheon suggests, I will not hesitate to examine irony where textual evidence supports an ironic reading.

Another important aspect of irony that bears directly upon Morrison's fiction is what to do with passages, or
even entire works, that seemingly do not lend themselves to ironic interpretations. What if there are no textual signs of irony, or if an author doesn’t reveal any ironic tendencies in her professional writings or interviews? Must there be direct textual evidence of irony for a work to be declared ironic? Or might a definition of irony be expanded to include John Seery’s argument that irony

primarily an outlook, a worldview, a mode of consciousness, a way of thinking. Indeed, one could argue that ‘irony’ is not even a thing but is a complex, interactive process and that the term in noun form belies its elusive nature, that it invites reification and reductionism. (169)

This shift away from total dependence upon textual evidence or authorial intention invites a wider interpretation of irony. Allowing for a more subjective approach to irony is not to suggest that objective approaches to irony are without merit, but is to suggest that by entertaining a broader definition of irony, ironies never before considered will begin to emerge. And by combining both an objective and subjective approach to irony, readers are able to bring their unique histories to the text, while at the same time retaining the discipline of objective observation.

By expanding irony’s scope to include both textual evidence and subjective ironies that encompass a broader
range of evidential requirements, irony's inherent nature to fight against set standards is more evident in literary interpretation. By expanding the range of ironic interpretation, subtle ironies can challenge dominant cultural thinking that once went unchallenged. Seery claims that irony's tendency to work against form is only natural considering irony's very nature: "The upshot of this idiosyncracy is truly remarkable for literary analysis: Irony cannot be 'defined' on the basis of its particular forms, even though in practice it necessarily assumes some form" (170). Irony, when expanded even further, allows for Soren Kierkegaard's understanding that

Ironic is an existential determination, and nothing is more ridiculous than to suppose that it consists in the use of a certain phraseology, or when an author congratulates himself upon succeeding in expressing himself ironically. Whoever has essential irony has it all day long, not bound to any specific form, because it is the infinite within him. (449)

Both Seery and Kierkegaard are expressing the notion that irony is far more complex than the simplistic definition of "saying one thing while meaning something else." Irony, in this case, allows both readers and authors to stretch the limits of irony to new and interesting levels.

Finally, to appreciate Morrison's use of irony in her fiction, one must also consider the idea that irony does
not always leave any signs of its presence. Seery argues that ironic interpretations need only be supported by "simultaneously competing and perhaps undercutting interpretations, that [the reader] be attentive to the possibility of 'otherness' of meaning with respect to the implied direction of a passage" (173). Beda Allemann goes one step further when she claims that

Literary irony is the more ironic, the more it is able to renounce the signs of irony — without losing its clarity. This fact entails the consequence that an adequate, purely formal definition of irony cannot be given for literature. Where the signals are missing, where indeed the inadequacy of the signals is precisely the precondition of the highest degree of irony, then we must necessarily give up hopes of a purely formal analysis, for the entirely negative signal can no longer be differentiated. (72)

Morrison’s fiction exhibits both textual ironies as well as ironies that are embedded within seemingly straightforward prose. Her use of irony to (re)position whites in her fiction allows readers to enter the text and explore political and cultural identities. By employing irony in this endeavor, Morrison allows her readers to arrive at understanding at their own speed and discretion.

In a similar fashion, Morrison utilizes metaphor to cast whiteness in an unfavorable light. I will now explore
how metaphor can be used to (re)construct as well as reverse the traditional roles of white and black. Furthermore, I will examine how this reversal can lead to a new understanding of accepted positions in society.

Kenneth Burke defines metaphor as a "device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this" (503). Edward P.J. Corbett likewise defines metaphor along classical lines as "an implied comparison between two things of unlike nature that yet have something in common" (444). I.A Richards expands metaphoric expression to include "those processes in which we perceive or think of or feel about one thing in terms of another — as when looking at a building it seems to have a face to confront us with a peculiar expression" (117). Morrison's own notion of metaphor is especially relevant:

Race has become metaphorical — a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was. Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily
discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. (Playing 63)

While Morrison is speaking about white racism, the same concepts of racialized discourse can be applied to any situation where race enters into metaphorical dimensions.

White presence in Morrison's fiction, in effect, assumes a metaphorical dimension. Whiteness, presented in a narrow, carefully crafted fashion, becomes a universal representation of evil and oppression. Individuality is lost in stereotypical characters who, for the most part, tend to embody the worst that humanity has to offer. By stripping away individuality, an author can turn fictional characters into representations that assume larger cultural significations. Speaking about how white American authors utilize this technique, Morrison argues that

Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their works with the signs and bodies of this presence (blackness)—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows. (Playing 6)

Morrison correctly identifies a trait in white American authors. Black characters and images of blackness fill many roles in American literature. Many of these images act as metaphorical representations of sexual license,
mystery, as well as more sinister images of evil. These same literary tools can be utilized in creating metaphorical images of whiteness as well. Morrison peoples her works with the "signs and bodies" of white presence. These images of whiteness tend to be accurate from a historical framework, but Morrison also infuses some of her white characters with metaphorical dimensions that at times test her readers credulity. These metaphorical images Morrison creates are crucial to her black characters sense of Americanness. And it shows.

While metaphorical representations can, and are, successfully utilized in positioning a group or individual as Other by exposing differences, it is equally valid to suggest that comparisons can be drawn from exposing similarities as well. By using metaphor to draw attention to similarities, an author can reveal commonalities that might not be as easily accepted by readers if an author chooses a different rhetorical approach. This sense of metaphor as a vehicle for revealing the truth and essence of similar entities is summed up by Marcel Proust:

Truth will not begin until the moment when the writer takes two different objects, sets down the relation between them that is the analogue in the world of art to the unique relation of the law of causation in the world of the sciences, and locks them together in the rings of a beautiful style, or
even, when, like life itself, in bringing together two sensations with a common quality he extracts their essence by uniting them with one another to withdraw them from the contingencies of time and fixes them by the indescribable bonds of a marriage (wedding ring) of words. (889)

Metaphor, in Proust's sense, allows an artist such as Morrison to bring together two opposing cultures and identify their similarities in such a fashion that allows her readers to process the similarities between their cultural habits and ambitions.

Of course, a difficulty arises when one begins to speculate upon whether or not an author intends certain metaphoric images to be interpreted outside a general understanding or traditional reading of a text. Just as it is important to consider whether or not an author intends irony in a text, it is equally important to consider whether or not an author's use of metaphorical structure is intended. But at the same time, an author's intentions are only one factor among many factors that determine a text's eventual interpretation. Readers are free to construct metaphorical interpretations of texts, if the text in question yields textual evidence that supports their interpretive stance. In other words, "Instead of explaining the original production of the metaphor by the author, we would be describing the production of a
metaphorical reading by the reader” (Culler 209). A reading that respects an author’s fictive intention, where an intention can be discerned, is not necessary for a valid interpretation to be rendered. But, if an author’s metaphorical intentions can be discerned through personal commentary and writings, then this information can be valuable for an eventual interpretation.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, another factor concerning metaphorical representation is the way metaphor can act to demonize both people as well as race in general. White authors have frequently used images of blackness to represent evil or the unknown. As Morrison suggests,

It. (blackness) offered platforms for moralizing and fabulation, and for the imaginative entertainment of violence, sublime incredibility, the terror — and terror’s most significant, overweening ingredient: darkness, with all the connotative value it awakened. (Playing in the Dark 37)

Blackness as a general metaphor tends to end up on the “dark” side of what is good and pure. Whether it is the black hat on a treacherous character in a cowboy movie, or a scary creature emerging from a black lagoon, blackness typically represents the undesirable or mysterious. What is not so evident is that whiteness can also be positioned as a terrorizing influence through the use of metaphorical images. According to bell hooks, whiteness as a symbol has
mistakenly become synonymous with goodness:

Socialized to believe the fantasy, that whiteness represents goodness and all that is benign and nonthreatening, many white people assume that is the way black people conceptualize whiteness. They do not imagine that the way whiteness makes its presence felt in black life, most often in terrorizing imposition, a power that wounds, hurts, tortures, is a reality that disrupts the fantasy of whiteness as representing goodness. ("Representations" 43)

This image of whiteness as a terrorizing influence is an important ingredient in how white characters, and images of whiteness in general, are cast in Morrison’s fiction.

White people in Morrison’s fiction may be as Page suggests, “Nameless, featureless white characters who hover on the fringes (63), but this should not preclude a study of their many functions, or Morrison’s argument with white society as a social structure. For by openly discussing the implications of whiteness within a black text we can follow Morrison’s own injunction to discover

What makes a work “Black.” The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language — its unpoliced, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasking language. Such a penetration will entail the most careful study, one in which the impact of Afro-American presence on modernity becomes clear and is no longer a well-kept secret.
In a real sense, the presence of white characters in Morrison's fiction helps to make her works "Black." The following chapter explores whiteness, and all its implications, in Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye.*
CHAPTER TWO

In Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, a little girl yearns for blue eyes to save her from the ugliness of her body, family, and very existence. In this chapter I will examine several passages from this first novel. I will look at how she positions her white characters as an Other in opposition to her black characters. I will also look at how Morrison utilizes white characters in particular, and white culture in general, as catalysts in the formation of black identity. In addition, I will explore her use of irony and metaphor to isolate and demonize white characters. And finally, I will analyze the rhetorical implications of Morrison's text and suggest that her central argument is with both whites and blacks who blindly accept the cultural myth that accompanies the presence of the white Other in African-American society.

*The Bluest Eye* illustrates the devastating effects of trying to mimic what one is not: how the very act of wishing to be accepted as part of a dominant culture, which one is not a part of, can strip one of his or her identity as a unique human being. As Gurleen Grewal states:

> The profound value of this novel lies in its demystification of hegemonic social processes — in its keen grasp of the way power works, the way
individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing a dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions. (21)

Morrison, in *The Bluest Eye*, is most certainly removing the veil of white culture's superiority, but she also reveals her black characters' complicity in internalizing the notion of white standards of beauty. In order to accomplish this goal textually, whites must assume the position of the Other. It must be noted here that to be Other is not necessarily to be weaker. An individual, or a group, can be Other without assuming superiority or inferiority. As Morrison duly notes concerning slaves positioned as Other: "For in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (*Playing 38*). It is this same sense of "not-me" that Morrison positions whites as Other in *The Bluest Eye*. She positions whites as a powerful Other that is not Black. White characters represent an Other who is excluded from the text's discourse, but is still able to exert its voice into the text through an accepted master narrative which supports white cultural superiority. Whites, in this position of the Other, act as a metaphorical mirror reflecting black character's internal images of self and community. Therefore, Morrison's
argument is with the myth of a white culture that presupposes a moral and spiritual superiority, and with her black characters' complicity in assuming standards that are dictated to them by an oppressing Other.

On the novel's first page, Morrison announces her intention to disrupt the traditionally accepted notions of white cultural stability—as expressed through the grammatically sound Dick and Jane primer—by destabilizing the rules which govern standard English. By destabilizing the primer, Morrison immediately unsettles white readers' expectations. As Lynne Tirrell states: "The story of Dick and Jane and the green-and-white house is a classic normative statement of white middle-class American culture, which provides the context within which the lives of the Breedloves and the MacTeers are set" (14). Morrison is challenging this classic primer's authority as a "normative statement of middle-class American culture," while at the same time positioning the grammatically sound white primer as a normative benchmark by which black characters are measured and judged. This initial move invites white readers to question the primer's authenticity in their lives and confirms her black readers' suspicions of the primer's authority in their lives.

The first text of the primer offers an idealized image
of white American culture. Before Morrison can position white culture as Other, she must first define the nature of the Other. In Morrison's case, the Other is represented by a white culture whose values and customs are antithetical to her vision of the African-American experience. The first text also acts as a textual metaphor for an unrealistic reality. The illusion of the ideal Dick and Jane primer works to mirror the unattainable to Morrison's black characters, while causing white readers to confront the irony of the primer's representation of a white ideal, that is in fact, realized by very few whites. Morrison's purposes here are two-fold: First by presenting the grammatically sound primer as the normative model, she is in effect creating a false foundation for her white readers, and secondly, she is establishing a clear Other for her black readers to work against. The first text, then, operates to create differing expectations within both her black and white readers.

The second text, despite the loss of capital letters, spacing, and punctuation marks, still maintains a semi-controlled coherency. Although there is a very real difference between the texts, with a minimal amount of effort, a serious reader has little trouble comprehending meaning. Therefore, the second text acts to disrupt the
first, or grammatically sound, version of the primer. This unsettling of the accepted master narrative suggests a conscious move by Morrison to call into question white culture’s appropriateness as a mirror for her black characters to fix the moorings of their lives. Morrison’s positioning of the second text immediately after the “correct” version calls into question the whole notion of “correctness” as a fixed ideal to be accepted without inquiry.

The second text also represents a place free from the restrictions and conventions established by the first text. This version stands metaphorically as a place of freedom from white appropriateness, and acts as an understandable middle ground for those characters in The Bluest Eye who are able to function within a society dominated by the Other. This notion of a workable middle ground where fixed rules are replaced by an understandable coherency is an integral component of Morrison’s argument against a white Other that values rules at the expense of humanity.

In losing all structure and coherence, the third text represents a complete disconnect from the first text. The rules that govern white society are abandoned, rendering an opposing vision incoherent. As Grewal suggests, “In the third text, there is nothing but irony — the gross distance
between ideal and reality" (26). The third text represents a reality occupied by those characters who are unable to function within either of the first two texts. Grewal goes on to state that:

Formally, the method by which the singular, primary Dick-and-Jane text organizes multiple, heterogeneous identities attests to the homogenizing force of an ideology (the supremacy of "the bluest eye") by which a dominant culture reproduces hierarchical power structures. (24)

By removing all accepted rules of grammar from the third text, Morrison is completely rejecting the "homogenizing force of an ideology by which a dominant culture reproduces hierarchical power structures." This move, coupled with the semi-controlled literacy of the second text, suggests that Morrison is developing a tripartite reality where the second text acts as a negotiated middle ground.

The third text also helps to establish the first text as Other. The first text represents a hierarchical power structure, while the third text represents its antithesis. This binary relationship acts as a metaphor for division throughout the novel. Herbert William Rice is correct when he says "The opening is the center of the tension around which Morrison will structure her novel: the distance between order and disorder, between the expected and the unexpected" (19). Morrison effectively positions white
characters, as well as white culture, as metaphors for order and the expected. Black characters, for the most part, stand as metaphors for disorder and the unexpected. By creating this division within a work of fiction dedicated to the African-American experience, Morrison is positioning the first text as not-us. The structured white primer serves only as a mirror by which to gauge the reality represented in the second and third texts. Therefore, Morrison's initial rhetorical move is to present her readers with a visual representation of her argument with the Other, as well as with her black characters. In other words, Morrison is challenging her black readers to question the cultural myths that surround white culture's representation of authentic experience, while at the same time challenging her white readers to question an ironic picture of white as Other that renders the Dick and Jane story an unfulfilled fantasy.

This initial positioning of white culture as "difference" is also utilized by Morrison throughout the novel to examine individual character identity formation, as well as how misguided attempts to mimic the Other can lead to identity destruction. Nowhere in The Bluest Eye is this misguided attempt to mimic the Other more evident than in the ironically named Breedlove family. Pecola Breedlove
hates the black self she sees in the mirror. Her sense of identity is fragmented to the point of wanting to physically disappear from life. Pecola relates blue eyes with happiness and security, an image supported by the primer. In Pecola's fragmented life, the only hope for an authentic experience is to "see" with the same eyes as those who are living the life she dreams of, white people. Philip Page is correct when he says that "She [Pecola] is left with her imagination and its fixation on a cure for what she believes is the cause of her isolation: values of white beauty" (51). Pecola wants to inhabit the ordered world of Dick and Jane. She wants to enter a community of order, safety, and beauty that the first text of the primer promises. Morrison is using Pecola's desire for blue eyes to illustrate the devastating effects of seeking to end one's suffering through appropriating values that are not consistent with one's own identity.

In Pecola's case, little white girls become the focus of her fixation. Shirley Temple and Mary Jane fulfill her fantasy of beauty and happiness. In essence, these white cultural icons act as metaphors for white perfection in little girls. Shirley Temple and Mary Jane act as physical manifestations of the fictional Jane of the primer. Pecola's initial reaction is to ingest the beauty she sees
in the Other. She suffers Mrs. McTeer’s wrath when she consumes three quarts of milk from a Shirley Temple cup: “we knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face” (23). Pecola is literally filling herself with white liquid held within the confines of the ideal white child. Morrison is using the white milk, and the image of Shirley Temple, as metaphors for the dominant white culture. These cultural metaphors work to rot Pecola from the inside out.

To contrast Pecola’s obsession with whiteness and its representations, Morrison immediately counters with a verbal tirade from the mouth of Mrs. McTeer:

Don’t nobody need three quarts of milk. Henry Ford don’t need three quarts of milk. That’s just downright sinful. I’m willing to do what I can for folks. Can’t nobody say I ain’t. But this has got to stop, and I’m just the one to stop it. (25)

This angry monologue, directed at Pecola specifically and her own children secondly, is important rhetorically for two reasons. First, Morrison is suggesting that material excess is sinful. Even for Henry Ford, who represents the excesses of material wealth in white America, three quarts of milk is extravagant. Secondly, this scene gives Morrison the opportunity to illustrate a more appropriate approach
to confronting sorrow and pain. Mrs. McTeer's daughter, Claudia, says that her mother's moods would sometimes lead her to sing instead of scream. It was during these singing periods that Claudia realizes that, "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" (26). The authentic greens and blues released from Mrs. McTeer's heart replace the fraudulent and sinful nature of excess associated with Henry Ford and Pecola's misguided attempt to consume the power she believes resides in that excess.

Morrison uses Pecola's encounter with the white shopkeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, to examine the consequences of allowing the white Other to alter or affect the gaze of African-Americans. Immediately before meeting Mr. Yacobowski, Morrison's narrator reminds readers of the structured white primer, although this version features the virtues of Jip, Alice, Jerry, and Mrs. Forrest's blue eyes (46). "This move once again ties Pecola's desire for white beauty to the inauthentic reality of the primer. But despite Pecola's fantasy that "if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too" (46), she is still able to see and appreciate the natural world around her. The narrator says
that "These [dandelions] and other inanimate things she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession" (47). Pecola is able to see with her brown eyes the natural world around her. Her longing for blue eyes has not blurred her ability to understand and possess her immediate world. Morrison is suggesting that sheer longing, while not necessarily healthy, is not fatal to self-identity and outer-awareness. But Pecola’s encounter with Mr. Yacobowski, who ironically possesses blue eyes, distorts her gaze toward the natural world, as well as her inner conception of self.

Morrison’s description of Mr. Yacobowski is less than flattering. Yacobowski is one who “looms up over the counter.” He has blue, blear-dropped eyes. His voice is a mixture of phlegm and impatience (48-49). Mr. Yacobowski’s encounter with Pecola is completely insignificant to him because “How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl?” (48). Yacobowski’s vision is blurred and limited to a sense of personal loss. Morrison’s description of Yacobowski suggests that the white Other,
within the black community, is unable to see the humanity before his eyes. Despite the simple intentions of a little girl, Yacobowski is unable to see or understand her desires. And while Morrison’s argument with the Other (Yacobowski) is centered around this lack of awareness, she mainly utilizes Mr. Yacobowski as a mirror to reflect Pecola’s inner turmoil, and by extension, the inappropriate value the black community attaches to the gaze of the white Other.

Pecola enters Yacobowski’s store to buy candy. Before she asks him for the candy “she looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition — the glazed separateness” (48). The glazed separateness and total lack of human recognition that Pecola sees in the face of the white man is not Morrison’s main point here. The inability of a middle-aged white man to recognize the humanity of a little black girl is not considered unusual in this novel. Instead, Morrison is more concerned with Pecola’s reaction to the gaze of the Other. Pecola has seen the same look before:

She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the
blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (49)

Pecola translates his gaze as repulsion for her skin, and she accepts this translation. She never questions Yacobowski's authority. She never challenges her internal image or dialogue. Unlike Claudia, who tears apart white dolls to uncover the mysteries of white power, Pecola simply accepts her blackness as static and dread.

Yacobowski's negative gaze also alters Pecola's view of the natural world. The dandelions, which she admired for their beauty before entering the store, now look back at her with the same separateness she just experienced with the Other:

Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, 'They are ugly. They are weeds.' Preoccupied with that revelation, 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. (50)

Pecola's shame manifests itself in an altered view of the world. The white Other has successfully redirected Pecola's gaze. But in this passage, and those that follow, Morrison also indicates an appropriate response to the Other's perceived interpretation of blackness: anger.

Pecola feels anger when she trips on the sidewalk.
Her anger works to counter the shame Yacobowski was able to stir in her. And as the narrator says: "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging" (50). But Pecola’s anger quickly subsides, and images of whiteness fill the void that righteous anger should rightly inhabit:

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. What to do before the tears come. She remembers the Mary Janes. (50)

Mary Jane fills the emptiness and shame that Mr. Yacobowski reveals in Pecola: “She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50). Morrison is pointing to the irony of allowing the Other to fill a void created by the Other’s rejection. The initial stirring of anger within Pecola is the appropriate response to counter the Other’s attempts to subjugate her. But by allowing her anger to fade under the gaze of the Other, Pecola is well on her way toward her wish for blue eyes and the consequences associated with being defined by the Other.
Morrison ends the encounter between Pecola and Mr. Yacobowski without a satisfying resolution. Pecola has bought into Yacobowski's interpretation of her blackness, and the resulting shame is too much for her under-developed identity. Samuels and Hudson-Weems state that:

We have to conclude that the total absence of human recognition Pecola sees in Yacobowski's glance corresponds to her own negative self-perception. She can be only thing, object, being-for-the-other. With this as her central standpoint, Pecola seems able to respond only with shame; and, as noted above, shame means that the individual allows him- or herself to be defined by 'the Other.' (19)

Pecola, situated as a being-for-the-other, fades into sexual release as she again attempts to ingest the empty metaphorical power of the Other: "Three pennies had brought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (50). Pecola's shame in the face of the Other is only soothed by abandoning herself to the Other, an irony that Morrison returns to again with Soaphead Church.

Like Pecola, Elihue Micah Whitcomb, a.k.a. Soaphead Church, struggles to define himself within a white world. Soaphead, "A cinnamon-eyed West Indian with light browned skin," was "reared in a family proud of its academic accomplishments and its mixed blood — in fact, they
believed the former was based on the latter" (167). He is a man with "a hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay" (169). Morrison is aligning Soaphead with the strictures of the grammatical version of the primer. His hatred of disorder, as well as his conviction of superiority based on his mixed blood place him within the ordered world of the Other. In this capacity, Soaphead becomes the final link in Pecola’s long line of victimizers.

The fact that Soaphead also longs for the values that white culture holds adds to the irony of Morrison selecting him to finally grant Pecola the eyes that will not only push her into insanity, but also free her from the ugly world she inhabits. Elihue is the only character in the novel who has the power and inside knowledge to grant such a wish. Morrison has positioned him as a link between the Other and the perceived disorder of the third text of the primer. Karen Carmean explains that

This character [Soaphead] is linked to Pecola in other, equally significant ways, for the elements of Soaphead’s background and character are identical with those which have ostracized Pecola throughout her life. (26)

Carmean goes on to say that Soaphead “comes from a family convinced that its intellectual superiority stems from its white blood” (26). Both Pecola and Soaphead are outcasts.
within their communities, both seek comfort and support from the white Other, and both are the products of abusive families. But while Soaphead's life mirrors the distorted reality of the third text, his blood, obsessive neatness, and perceived superiority connect him to the first text of the primer, thereby positioning him as an conduit between Pecola and the power of the Other.

Soaphead fully understands the significance of Pecola wanting to obtain the power that blue eyes possess in a white culture, but he unfortunately lacks the humanity, or any motivation for financial gain, to explain the impossibility of obtaining the unattainable to little Pecola. As Soaphead explains to God, "I, I have caused a miracle... No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right to do so" (182). But just as the metaphorical power of the Other renders Soaphead Church a deviant pariah within his own community, the metaphorical power of possessing the bluest eyes of the Other damages Pecola's identity beyond recognition, "The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear" (204).

Soaphead Church is a necessary character within
Morrison's argument. To uncover and expose the myth of white superiority, it was essential for Morrison to create a character that embodied both blood strains. And while Soaphead may represent the worst of both camps, he is the only character in the novel that can appreciate Pecola's longings. By creating Soaphead Church, Morrison again points to the irony of people of color seeking to create an authentic life through inauthentic means. Soaphead, like the old crippled dog Bob, serves little or no value in the white world he longs to inhabit. Acting as a metaphorical dog, Soaphead, at least in Morrison's argument against the Other, will suffer the same fate as old Bob.

In Pecola's case, Morrison uses white people and white cultural values to reveal how longing for standards that are not culturally compatible can lead to a total loss of identity. Even if those perceived values are obtained, one's identity is still crushed under the weight of an inauthentic life. Morrison's argument here is not with white culture per say, but with African-Americans uncritically appropriating a dominant culture's standards of beauty and worthiness. Morrison is suggesting that healthy identities are formed within the context of culturally authentic experiences, and that before a black individual, or for that matter any individual, can
successfully incorporate the values of another group, one must be thoroughly acquainted with one's own culture. In *The Bluest Eye*, culturally authentic experiences are limited mainly to Claudia's family, the community of women at Aunt Jimmy's funeral, and the three prostitutes.

After Pecola slips into insanity, the community of Lorain still fails to see that the damage done to Pecola is a direct function of adhering to false standards of beauty. Instead, the black community holds Pecola to the same standards of beauty and appropriateness that are dictated to them by white culture. Morrison is not suggesting that white values in and of themselves are evil. As Claudia says,

All of us — all who knew her — felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used — to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. (205)

Pecola is ugly, but by whose standards? For Morrison, white standards of beauty serve this normative function in the novel. The community uses Pecola as a rag to clean themselves with, but what was the dirt they were trying to
remove from themselves? The community has accepted white
culture's standards of beauty and appropriateness, and
because they are unable to consciously acknowledge the
devastating nature of that reality, they turn their shame
against the representation of their own ugliness, Pecola.

The lack of relief on the community's part that
accompanies Pecola's destruction illustrates the
community's fundamental lack of understanding of either her
personal loss, or their continuing reliance on foreign
standards. As Trudier Harris suggests,

The irony is that her scapegoating does not purge
the community of its reliance on alien standards of beauty; it merely
solidifies those images. To be ugly and outcast leads to destruction; to be beautiful and in the community provides one of the strongest possibilities for salvation. (50)

The community of Lorain fails to see that Pecola's journey
to insanity is directly related to mimicking the Other in
ways that are impossible. Her ugliness is a reflection
from a mirror not of their choosing, but a mirror dictated
to them by the dominant white culture. Harris goes on to say that, "Insanity and death are the only releases from such a torture, and Pecola's insanity might just as well be a death" (51). Morrison's argument with the Other in this case is its complete lack of awareness of its power to
corrupt those without, as well as within, mainstream American society. But she also takes umbrage with the black community for allowing the Other to impose impossible standards, and then buying into those standards without reservation.

While Pecola becomes a victim of both interracial and intraracial bigotry, her parents, Cholly and Pauline, are also victimized by the presence of white people. Just as Morrison uses white people in the destruction of Pecola’s identity, she also uses white people as a mirror to reflect Cholly and Pauline’s inauthentic existence. Both Cholly and Pauline live in the shadow of the white Other. The shadow cast by the perfect white father and mother of the first text prevent Cholly and Pauline from finding what is authentic for them. In the primer, “Mother is very nice. Mother will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile” (9). Cholly and Pauline are unable to emerge from this shadow of perfection. Cholly reacts by becoming the antithesis of the primer father, and Pauline, unlike the primer mother, rejects her daughter in an attempt to appropriate the comforts of the primer mother. The net result is a complete absence of self. As Samuels
and Hudson-Weems say, “Using the personal histories of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Morrison created fictional lives that metaphorically suggest absolute absence” (25). Without the white Other, this metaphorical absence would not exist. As with Pecola and Soaphead, Morrison’s argument is with the white Other’s power to inappropriately influence African-American experiences.

Despite starting life on a “trash heap,” Cholly’s early years were spent under the tutelage of his Aunt Jimmy. Along with M’Dear and the other women of the community, Cholly is surrounded by an authenticity that Morrison seems to introduce as a possible substitution for the primer in the black community. The structure may not fit the white master narrative, but all the components of a working, healthy community exist. Harris argues that Morrison uses the sickness and death of Aunt Jimmy to illustrate the community’s traditions in times of need (“Reconnecting” 70). Morrison not only provides Cholly with the unshakable support of a community of women, but she also provides him with a strong black man to model authentic behavior:

Watching the figure [Blue] etched against the bright blue sky, Cholly felt goose pimples popping along his arms and neck. He wondered if God looked like that. NO. God was a nice old white man, with long white hair,
flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad. It must be the devil who looks like that — holding the world in his hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm insides. If the devil did look like that, Cholly preferred him. (134)

At this point in Cholly's life his universe consists of black women and men seeking an authentic existence in a white world that holds little, if any, interest in them as people. These traditions, along with the powerful figure Blue casts in Cholly's life, might have provided him with the ammunition to battle the White Other's influence in his life.

Cholly's first encounter with the white Other is during his first sexual experience. Morrison introduces whites into Cholly's life at his most vulnerable moment, "There stood two white men. One with a spirit lamp, the other with a flash light. There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it" (147). By introducing the white hunters at this stage of Cholly's development, Morrison indicates her willingness to test her character's internal fortitude in the face of great external pressures. Cholly fails the test, as most any young boy would. But Morrison is also indicting the faceless white hunters. While the white hunters simply walk away from the scene
when they are through with Cholly, Morrison allows her white readers to witness the damage done to the black self by hate-filled words from an Other who fails to see blacks as human.

Ironically, Cholly’s hatred is not aimed at the white hunters. The white Other represents a power and authority beyond his experiences. Therefore, Cholly’s feelings are inverted, because he is unable to conceive of a scenario where a young black man could confront white men, regardless of the white men’s social status:

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscience mind did not guess — that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. (151)

The white men function in this case to expose Cholly’s internal insecurities, as well as to provide Morrison with an opportunity to expose the unnatural power relationship between white and black men, and the fruitlessness of a young black man trying to reverse the situation. Morrison is fixing in the reader’s mind a cultural system that renders the black man impotent in the presence of the white Other. In effect, the white hunters serve to direct
Cholly's life, the way he views himself, and how he views black women.

After this encounter with the white men, Cholly's life is defined. His search for his father ends in frustration, and a new and dangerous Cholly emerges, "He was free to live his fantasies, and free even to die, the how and the when held no interest for him" (159). It is this "damaged Cholly" who rapes his daughter. And while Cholly is responsible for actions both before and after the rape, Carmean suggests that "he [Cholly] merely serves as the instrument of a culture which values females primarily for their beauty and then assesses their worth according to narrow racist standards" (24). These "narrow racist standards" are determined by a white culture that fails to see blacks as participants. In Cholly's limited world these white standards represent an Other beyond his physical reach, but within reach of his mental fantasies. In other words, Cholly, acting as both victim and victimizer, moves beyond the confines of any version of the primer. Even the third text, with its loss of structure and coherence, maintains a representational positioning with the other versions of the text. But Cholly is "Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt—fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or
violent, or whistle or weep” (159). Morrison has positioned him outside the realm of acceptability within any version of the primer, rendering him a social pariah.

As suggested earlier, Cholly stands as a metaphor of absolute absence. He is incapable of filling the role of father within any version of the primer. Morrison is suggesting that with the help and guidance of Aunt Jimmy and Blue, Cholly might have survived his mother’s abandonment, but he was unable to survive the glare of the white hunters. It is the white gaze that damages Cholly’s self image, and it is the white gaze that turns his self-hatred outward toward black women. Whites serve to spur Cholly’s actions by destroying any hope for a healthy identity. And without a healthy identity, the model father in the primer is an illusion in Cholly’s world. Cholly, in the world of the master narrative, represents an absolute absence, but in his world he is dangerously fragmented, as well as dangerously free.

Therefore, by understanding the “why” of Cholly’s life, the “how” is somewhat mitigated. As Claudia says, Cholly loved her. I’m sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. (206)
Cholly’s love has no place in a civilized society, because his love has been distorted by an Other he cannot understand, or as Page explains:

Given the single, white standard for beauty and value imposed on all Americans, potentially creative and liberated men like Cholly have no physical or psychic place, cannot keep open the process of becoming and hence have no group or individual identity. (48)

This single white standard of beauty dictated to him by a foreign culture renders Cholly invisible, or absent in the white world, but quite visible and lethal in his own world.

Morrison, through Cholly’s life, is illustrating the devastating effects the white Other has on a black man’s identity. She is also suggesting that the shame and impotence caused by the Other’s emasculating power can come back to haunt white culture: “He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men – but not now. Not in impotence but later, when hatred could find sweet expression” (151). The myth of a single white standard of beauty that cripples and distorts Cholly’s life in turn cripples and distorts white society. There is no room for Cholly in the white primer, so he becomes what he can within his world, a predator.

Like her daughter Pecola, Pauline Breedlove is permanently damaged trying to emulate white culture’s
standards of beauty. Pauline, even more than Pecola, provides Morrison with an opportunity to explore the ironic nature of beauty. White women become the Other in Pauline's life. White women represent the difference Pauline seeks to imitate in her effort to create an authentic life. The Other in Pauline's case represents the energy and potential that she needs to survive (McGowan 122). Pauline's identity is directly challenged by Hollywood's vision of the perfect woman:

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. There at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the river banks, the gentle knowing eyes. There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and the halt threw away their crutches. There death was dead, and people made every gesture in a cloud of music. There the black-and-white images came together, making a magnificent whole — all projected through the ray of light from above and behind. (122)

Pauline holds herself to an unattainable standard presented to her by the Other. And just as most white women were not able to measure up to the lofty standards of movie stars, Pauline is not able to appropriate the images she sees on the silver screen. Since Pauline is unable to develop an identity separate from the one presented to her by white
culture, she does the next best thing "She became what is known as an ideal servant for such a role filled practically all of her needs" (127). Cholly's fragmented identity leads him to a death fueled by a dangerous, self-destructive freedom, while Pauline's fragmented identity leads her to a subservient capitulation to a white Other she is unable to emulate.

Pauline provides Morrison with an opportunity to point to the irony of how black and white women each interpret the messages of the dominant culture. While a white woman might feel a loss of self in comparison to a glamorous star such as Jean Harlow, this loss is not total, because Harlow represents the best her group has to offer — and she is part of that group. Conversely, when Pauline sets herself in comparison with Harlow, the loss of self is far more damaging. As Ed Guerrero suggests:

Uniquely, though, the operation of this look resides at the nexus of the contradiction and irony for Pauline in ways that it doesn’t for the white female spectator. For while many white feminist critics argue that women suffer negation of self by having to identify with a sexual object displayed for the pleasure of the male gaze at the screen, Pauline as a woman, and as one of color, must suffer this negation in a compound sense, for her likeness hardly exists anywhere on the screen. She is therefore forced to look at and apply to herself a completely unrealizable, alien standard of
feminine beauty and to experience the dissatisfaction resulting from the contradiction. The problem for Pauline with the dominant gaze built into classic cinema is that, in her specific situation, it conjures up the triple devaluation of being female, black and poor. (30)

This unrealistic standard of white feminine beauty leaves Pauline's identity fragmented. The negation of self Pauline feels is compounded by her black skin. Pauline doesn't have an image of black beauty to strive toward, so she strives to emulate the only standard of beauty presented to her. She longs for the beauty and power of Jean Harlow, just as Pecola longs for the sweetness of Shirley Temple, and despite their best efforts, neither will ever be able to appropriate the beauty they desire. Morrison is pointing to the devastating effects of blacks modeling inauthentic lives to their children, as well as the destructive results that can follow. And just as Pecola's identity is lost in a schizophrenic haze, Pauline's identity is metaphorically absent as symbolized by her missing front tooth (123).

This metaphorical absence is further illustrated by Pauline's transformation into an "ideal servant." Pauline emotionally abandons her family for the trappings of whiteness. For Pauline,

It was her good fortune to find a
permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative, and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child's pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. (127)

In the Fisher household Pauline is othered. She represents complete difference to the white family. They are unaware and uninterested in Pauline outside of her domestic skills: "We'll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really she is the ideal servant" (128). Pauline is reduced to a stereotypical image of the perfect house servant. Pauline therefore throws herself into an identity that the Other offers her, that of a servant. Her rejection of Pecola in favor of the Fishers' daughter is a natural reaction of a person devoid of a coherent identity, or as Grewal argues, "In accepting the stigmatized identity that her race confers on her, Pauline Breedlove ends up negating her daughter while maintaining a social order (the white Fisher household) that recognizes her only as 'the ideal servant" (31).

Pauline's position as Other in the Fisher household is
a typical power relationship in America, but in Morrison's novel the Fishers ironically assume the position of Other to Pauline. The Fishers represent perfect difference for Pauline. For Pauline, the Fisher household is where "...she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" (126). These qualities represent a reciprocal experience for Pauline. As McGowan suggests, the Fishers, as complete Other, possess the energy and potential that Pauline seeks to create a workable identity (122). Likewise Pecola seeks this same energy from what represents her complete antithesis, Shirley Temple. Morrison is arguing that no matter who is being positioned as Other, self-respect and authenticity must precede a true reconciliation with one's complete opposite. In The Bluest Eye this attempted reconciliation is one-sided. Whites in this novel are not interested in blacks beyond what or how blacks can serve them. Morrison fails to give any white character the depth to move beyond the stereotypical images of white life presented in the primer. Therefore like her daughter and her husband, Pauline fails to appropriate an authentic identity and falls victim to an inauthentic reality based on the values of a stereotypical white Other.

The Bluest Eye offers little hope for the Breedloves' future. The world of the Other overpowers their attempts
at authentic experience. Samuels and Hudson-Weems are correct when they say, "Succumbing to a life for 'the Other' the Breedloves destroy themselves" (28). But this is not to suggest that all of the characters in the novel fail to negotiate an effective strategy for dealing with the Other's presence. And while white people act as a metaphorical mirror in which black characters evaluate themselves, Claudia, and the three prostitutes, provide alternatives for living in a society dominated by the Other's presence.

Morrison uses Claudia to question the validity of white beauty. Unlike Pecola, who longs for the beauty and power of the Other, Claudia is angered by the seeming contradictions found in appropriating the looks of the Other: "Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her [Shirley Temple]. What I felt at the time was unsullied hatred" (19). Claudia looks past the apparent surface beauty of white dolls and tries to uncover the mystery behind the white faces that others long for: "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 treasured" (20). Claudia's anger at
the Other manifests itself through destroying the white-skinned dolls. By uncovering the mystery of whiteness, Claudia discovers that white dolls are only a collection of metal parts, pink plastic, and yellow hair. Morrison is suggesting through Claudia’s experimentation that blacks need to first dissect the Other before blindly accepting their standards as superior. In other words, Claudia, unlike Pecola and Pauline, is unwilling to accept whiteness as a standard of beauty without first testing the validity of white culture’s claim to superiority; therefore, as Samuels and Hudson-Weems state, "It is Claudia’s inability to live a life of being-for-the-other that causes her to 'out live' Pecola" (23).

Morrison also uses Claudia as an example of one who is determined to live a life that is her own, and not one dictated to her by any outside influence. But unlike Cholly, Claudia is able to negotiate her existence within the bounds of civilized society. By destroying the little white dolls that other people give to her as presents, Claudia acts out with anger against the culture that is forcing its standards upon her. Through Claudia, Morrison is illustrating an appropriate response to domination by the Other. When one group claims superiority based upon skin color, the only logical response is anger and
rebellion. Claudia uses her voice to articulate her anger—giving her a measure of power, even though in reality she holds little power. Her reactions are in direct opposition to Pecola’s reactions to whiteness. This is not to suggest that Claudia is heroic, only that her reactions to whiteness are an example of a more effective strategy for dealing with the Other. Later in Claudia’s life she too learns that the Other is an unavoidable factor in her daily life, and “thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love.” She goes on to say that “It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (23). Claudia’s life, like Pecola’s, is a mixture of irony and accommodation. It is ironic in that they both seek to live in a world that is dominated by an Other that presents an image that neither girl is able to realize. The difference between the girl’s lives is Claudia’s ability to find an accommodation, based on anger and reality, with the Other that allows her to live an authentic life, while Pecola succumbs to the pressures of possessing the bluest eyes and loses her mind. By allowing Claudia to emerge as a functioning adult within a white society, Morrison is perhaps suggesting that
accommodation with the Other is tentatively available, but only by first questioning the Other’s power, and then living an authentic life based on reality not fantasy.

While Claudia learns to live with the Other through an investigation of the Other’s essence, the three prostitutes - Poland, China, and Miss Marie - live lives free from any external dominations. Unlike Pauline, Geraldine, and Maureen Peal, who try to constrain their natural emotions [funk] in an effort to fit into the dominant culture, the prostitutes freely display their true identities:

All three of the women laughed. Marie threw back her head. From deep inside, her laughter came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea. China giggled spastically. Each gasp seemed to be yanked out of her by an unseen hand jerking an unseen string. Poland, who seldom spoke unless she was drunk, laughed without sound. When she was sober she hummed mostly or chanted blues songs, which she knew many. (52-53)

The language Morrison uses to describe the prostitute’s laughter is rich with unbridled emotion. There is no embarrassment or restraint in them or their actions. They live for themselves without regard for white people or black people. The prostitutes live in a race-neutral environment in which they hate all men: "Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever — all
were inadequate and weak, all came under the jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath" (56). The prostitutes hold little respect for hypocritical women either: "Neither did they have respect for women, who, although not their colleagues, so to speak, nevertheless deceived their husbands — regularly or irregularly, it made no difference. Sugar-coated whores they called them, and did not yearn to be in their shoes." The only women that they respect are "...good Christian colored women. The women whose reputation was spotless, and who tended to her family, who didn’t drink or smoke or run around" (56). In other words, Morrison’s prostitutes are living authentic lives based on a code of morals (although ironic) of their own design. In essence, Morrison positions the prostitutes as examples of lives in harmonious opposition to the Other’s standards. The prostitutes are not beautiful or glamorous by the Other’s standards, but they are not influenced positively or negatively in any way by this break from the dominant culture. Morrison has positioned them outside the norms of both black and white society, where their lives are free to become what they wish.

Morrison also uses the prostitutes as a representation of defiance in a hostile environment. White men are no different than black men or any other ethnic group. All
men are created equal. China, Marie, and Poland treat everyone the same, and expect nothing in return. Their identities are not influenced by white standards of beauty, and they are willing to be outcasts in their own communities in order to maintain their authenticity. This is not to say that Morrison is suggesting that the only path to an authentic life is to become a social pariah, but that whatever one's self-definition is, one must stay true to that identity despite any outside social pressures. As Samuels and Hudson-Weems explain:

The three prostitutes, China, Poland, and Miss Marie (Maginot line), are middle-aged women whose forte is their spirit of noncompliance. In the discourse, what is significant is not the values or questions of morality associated with their lives as 'fancy women.' They are self-employed people who control their business; they are independent and self-reliant. Though no longer young, they do not appear squandered or devastated. They are social pariahs, yet they are not devoid of self-confidence. (20)

By positioning the prostitutes as pariahs, Morrison has removed them from the bounds of the primer. They are free to define themselves as they see fit. It is this sense of self-confidence and self-reliance that is lacking in many of the novel's characters who seek to define themselves within the boundaries of the primer. It is also this
notion of self-identity that separates the prostitutes' freedom from Cholly's self-destructing freedom, and allows them to live successful lives outside the bounds of the primer. The central component of this self-confidence is an identity developed free from the imposition of standards and cultural values not of one's choosing.

The Bluest Eye, as Page suggests, examines the divisions between cultures and individuals: "even though exploration of a split and inverted world involves painful revelations, the exploration is necessary, for in a racialized society the split, the inversion, and the consequent double consciousness are always present." Page goes on to say that by

Exposing the gaps between the dominant standards and the hegemony they impose on the disprivileged members of society is therefore a first step toward understanding the hierarchy and its implications. Such an examination suggests that recognizing the split has creative potential, that it dislodges individuals from worn-out, restrictive, and distorting absolutes, allowing for release into the play of the differance. (38)

Without the presence of the Other, in the form of white characters, this play of differance can not occur. In this first novel, Morrison utilizes white cultural icons (Shirley Temple and Jean Harlow) as well as more mundane
characters such as Mr. Yacobowski, as a metaphorical mirror to reflect the absolute values of white beauty. By exposing cracks in the mirror, as well as the primer, Morrison challenges both black and white readers to question the authority of absolutes. Morrison is also challenging her readers to question the validity of the primer's authority. The idyllic life represented by the first version of the primer is inappropriate for most Americans, no matter their race or background. Personal authenticity in Morrison's fictive world is developed through loyalty to one's own self and internal motivations within the confines of a hostile society. As Rice concludes:

This novel begins with the primer version of reality because it is inescapable. Thus, the issue becomes not escape but reconciliation, not with the society that has disinherited them but with the self that has been disinherited. (35)

The reconciliation of the self is a reoccurring theme in Morrison's fiction. The Bluest Eye is her first step along this continuing quest to reconcile the disinherited self to an authentic existence, and, eventually, the disinherited community to the community of the Other.
CHAPTER THREE

Morrison's argument with the white Other in The Bluest Eye is the central concern of this project, but it is important to understand the continuing nature of her argument with white America. Therefore I will briefly expand on Morrison's argument by exploring the function and position of the white Other in her next two novels, Sula and Song of Solomon.

In Morrison's second novel, Sula, white people are positioned as menacing Others to be feared and avoided. And while Page is right when he calls white people "the nameless, featureless white characters who hover on the fringes" (63), white people are hardly a benign factor in the novel. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola, Pauline, and other black characters look at images presented to them by the white primer and try to incorporate white standards into their lives with devastating results. But in Sula it is black culture that assumes the primer position. The black community of Medallion, or the Bottom, is the central focus of the novel, and it is the white community that fails to understand the culture and activities of black life. As Rice explains: "Much like the world of the Breedloves, the Bottom is hard for the white reader to understand because it does not conform to traditional norms and values, but it
does have its own kind of order" (37). By reversing the pattern she established in her first novel, Morrison is able to illustrate the unwillingness of the white Other to either learn or accommodate the values and order of the African-American community. Unable, or unwilling, to comprehend the black primer life that the Bottom represents, the white Other seeks to contain and control blacks within well-defined boundaries. The distorting effects of this control and containment form Morrison's central argument with the Other in Sula.

White people, and images of whiteness, also act metaphorically to oppress and subvert black characters' daily lives. When Helene and Nel travel south for a funeral, Morrison positions whites along the way to contain their movements as well as humiliate them at every opportunity. Shadrack, after serving his country in World War I, is unceremoniously cast out of a white-run Army hospital while still suffering from psychological disorientation. The black men of Medallion are continually passed over for work in favor of their white counterparts. Morrison's argument is not with her black characters' lack of response to the white Other's oppressive tactics, but with the tactics themselves, leaving white readers to make the necessary connections of responsibility.
In addition, Morrison refuses to give names to most white characters, reducing them to either simple pronouns, or non-personal titles such as the "conductor" or the "sheriff." She fills their mouths with stereotypical dialogue and portrays them in the worst possible light. After discovering the dead body of Chicken Little, the "bargeman" reported his finding to the "sheriff" who said they didn’t have no niggers in their county, but that some lived in those hills 'cross the river, up above Medallion. The bargeman said he couldn’t go all the way back there, it was every bit two miles. The sheriff said whyn’t he throw it on back into the water. The bargeman said he ever shoulda taken it out in the first place. (64)

This dialogue is meant to shock people of all races, but is specially aimed at her white readers. Morrison’s argument is with centuries of racial insensitivities, as well as the dehumanizing nature of perceived racial superiority. The white Other stands as a representation of the worst of this hatred in Sula. By failing to give her white characters individual names, Morrison allows her white readers to question how they may have responded in the same or similar situation and thereby make the necessary connections.

But despite these sometimes heavy-handed tactics, Morrison’s rhetorical strategy allows her to extend her argument with the Other beyond a questioning of standards
and values to a direct frontal attack against a racist society that has traditionally subjugated African-Americans. She is also challenging her white readers to question their culpability in positioning blacks outside the mainstream, as well as challenging her black readers to question the source of their positioning within a dominant culture.

Despite casting white characters as menacing Others in *Sula*, Morrison's rhetorical strategy also allows for the possibility of future reconciliation. The valley man takes pleasure in the sounds and activities of the Bottom even though he is unable to comprehend them (4). The white hunters, who sometimes traveled through the Bottom, wondered if "...maybe the white farmer was right after all. Maybe it was the bottom of heaven" (6). Morrison is pointing to the beginnings of a connection, but a connection that is still in its infancy. Denise Heinze explain

The desire of the valley people to appropriate a once undesirable place represents an escape from the constructs of their social reality, and a creation of their own myth of ascension. The whites long for a return to community, where people take time out for each other, and a return to the primitive - shacks barely discernible from the trees - where heat, dust, and progress are distant memories. (126)
Heinze is suggesting that white people have an internal longing for a connection with the values represented by the community of the Bottom. But as Heinze goes on to say: "The longing of the valley people blinds them to the pain of the Bottomites" (126). Morrison is arguing that the pain inflicted on the citizens of the Bottom by the white Other must be acknowledged and reversed before a reconciliation can be approached. And while whites must come to terms with a racist past, blacks must come to terms with their own individual histories before a reconciliation can be successful. This is a major theme of Morrison's next novel *Song of Solomon*, in which the white Other again assumes an important role in Morrison's rhetorical strategy.

In *Song of Solomon* white people assume a much lower profile. There is no overt white primer to establish a baseline standard of white beauty as in *The Bluest Eye*, although the realities of segregation are still evident in the text. White people are not an overtly menacing Other controlling and containing black people's mobility as in *Sula*. Although Morrison's argument with the Other in *Song of Solomon* does not necessarily break new ground, it does subtly combine her arguments from the first two novels. To this end, Morrison utilizes white people to help explore
three main areas of racial contention: assimilation, violence, and the power to name.

Morrison's argument with assimilation is embodied in the figure of Macon Dead II. Macon's life philosophy is capsulized when he tells his son that "Money is freedom...The only real freedom there is" (163). Macon's only goal in life is to "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Morrison counters this traditional representation of white capitalist progress by isolating Macon outside the community of African-Americans in Southside. This physical separation is a metaphorical separation as well. According to Page:

Like the violent divisions in American society, here the black community is also radically divided. As opposed to the relative homogeneity of the black communities in The Bluest Eye and Sula, the Southside is divided between Macon and Ruth's neighborhood and Pilate's. It is divided politically between the assimilationists, like Macon, and the radical separatists, like the Seven Days. (90)

This political division between the radical elements of the black community and the assimilationists allows Morrison to define and illustrate appropriate responses to the white Other. In Macon's case, complete assimilation with the Other's values, without a corresponding connection with an
authentic self, leads to a "Dead" life. Just like Pecola, Macon's life is void of authentic cultural experiences, because as Rice says "He is far too busy living out the American dream of owning things, the very dream that caused white people to shoot his father" (65). Pecola's obsession with obtaining the bluest eyes is matched by Macon's desire to obtain the American dream. But the American dream that Macon seeks is not one of his own defining.

Morrison is suggesting, through Macon's hollow life, that Black people must not blindly accept the language and definitions of the dominant white culture. Her argument extends to the dominant culture's assumption of one discourse, or formula, for success. In his essay "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin states that "there are no 'neutral' words and forms." He goes on to say that "Language...lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intentions, his own accent, when he appropriates the word..." (293). Morrison is arguing for a new definition of success based on a culturally rooted model. Macon Dead, on the other hand, is the result of blindly assimilating the definitions of success as defined by Others, and not seeking to add his own accent to a definition harmonious with his authentic
self.

While Morrison argues against unquestioned assimilation, she also argues against radical actions in response to the Other. Morrison is cognizant of the brutality visited upon innocent blacks by whites. She alludes to the 1955 murder of Emmett Till:

A young Negro boy had been found stomped to death in Sunflower County, Mississippi. There was no question about who stomped him — his murderers had boasted freely — and there were no questions about the motive. The boy had whistled at some white woman, refused to deny he had slept with others, and was a Northerner visiting the South. His name was Till. (80)

Morrison also alludes to other historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and the struggles and divisions black people fought with white America. There is little question of Morrison's argument with the white Other in the context of the civil rights movement, but she utilizes black people in this specific context to illustrate an inappropriate response to white brutality. She does this through the vigilante group, The Seven Days, in general, and through Guitar Bains in particular.

The Seven Days, at least on the surface, seem to represent a reasonable response to the evils whites commit against blacks. As Guitar explains:

There is a society. It's made up of a
few men who are willing to take some risks. They don’t initiate anything; they don’t even choose. They are as indifferent as rain. But when a Negro child, Negro woman, or a Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law, their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. (154)

The logic of The Seven Days seems sound, especially if one views all white people as potential threats: “There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one” (155). Whereas in Sula, Morrison allows this type of hyperbole to pass without comment, in Song of Solomon Morrison counters this language through Milkman’s responses to Guitar: “What about the nice ones? Some whites made sacrifices for Negroes. Real sacrifices” (156). This is not to suggest that Morrison is excusing the atrocities that Guitar seeks revenge for, but she understands the illogic of violence to counter the Other’s power.

Morrison illustrates the ineffectiveness of The Seven Days’ violent approach to white oppression through the lives of those characters associated with the society. The novel opens with the suicide of Robert Smith. He longs to fly, just as Milkman does, but the damage done to his soul by his membership in the Days instead leads to his death. Likewise Porter is unable to cope with the cold logic of
the Days' mission. He is only able to correct his life when he disavows his membership in the society. Finally, Morrison is pointing to the ironic nature of the Days. By randomly executing innocent white people, the members of the Days become what they hate most in the Other's nature. As Theodore O. Mason Jr. suggests: "Despite their avowed stand against passivity, in a perverse way the Days remain dependent on the actions of whites. The particular black people certain whites kill and how they are killed determine the conduct of their lives" (178-179). The Seven Days, as a response to the white Other, is clearly inappropriate. Morrison moves beyond her generalized indictment of the Days' approach to white violence, to closely explore the negative effects of personalized hatred against whites through the life of Guitar.

Morrison positions Guitar as a representation of extreme black frustration against the white Other. Through the militant language of Guitar, Morrison reflects the deep dissatisfaction black men feel with white American power structures.

Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can't help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don't even know why. But look here, don't carry it inside
and don’t give it to nobody else. Try to understand it, but if you can’t, just forget it and keep yourself strong, man. (87-88)

Page suggests that “This principle applies to all of Morrison’s novels: racial oppression leads to displacement and self-destructive behavior whose causes are inexplicable” (90-91). These sentiments are justifiable and require a response, but Morrison argues against Guitar’s reciprocal approach to white violence, in favor of a more tempered response grounded in personal awareness as exemplified by Milkman’s journey.

Milkman eventually focuses on connecting with his past, and learns to incorporate that knowledge into his present. White people are not a part of his equation unless they are somehow connected to his history. White people do not consume Milkman. He rejects Guitar’s violence as being more harmful to the black man than to the white man:

Guitar, none of that shit is going to change how I live or how any other Negro lives. What you’re doing is crazy. And something else: it’s a habit. If you do it enough, you can do it to anybody. You know what I mean? A torpedo, is a torpedo, I don’t care what his reasons. (160-161)

Morrison is suggesting, through Milkman’s language, that allowing the white Other to consume black men’s thoughts
will ironically transform them into what they are seeking to end, or as Jan Furman explains: "When Guitar's anger over white brutality against blacks impels him to join the Seven Days as their Sunday man, the anger inside implodes, and he becomes what he hates— a murderer" (40). Unbridled retribution against whites is clearly not a tact that Morrison argues for as evidenced by Guitar's psychological disintegration. Morrison instead argues for reclaiming the power to name as an appropriate response to the white Other's power.

Morrison is very concerned about names: how they are given, who they are given by, and who has the power to name. White culture has always sought to control the right to name black people. By controlling the power of naming, whites are able to define and shape African-Americans into a more understandable mold for white America. According to Cynthia A. Davis, "Blacks are visible to white culture only insofar as they fit its frame of reference and serve its needs. Thus they are consistently reduced and reified, losing their independent reality" (28). In Song of Solomon, Morrison is arguing for the right and the responsibility of defining oneself according to one's cultural heritage. As Roberta Rubenstein explains: "Names are important, not only as ironic comments on the
characters who bear them, but as emblems of the black community’s resistance to the white culture’s negation of its world” (154). Therefore in Morrison’s world, names stand as symbols of resistance against the white Other’s power to control.

In Song of Solomon, Not Doctor Street and No Mercy Hospital act as vehicles of negation against the white power structure. Or as Rubenstein says “...counternegation[s] of the white world that delimits the black one” (154). The black residents of Southside named these two locations according to their functions, and passively resisted all attempts to change them to accommodate “Some of the city legislators, whose concern for appropriate names...” (4) outweighed the residents’ wishes. Unlike Guitar’s violent tendencies, Morrison is illustrating the power of passive resistance and the importance of controlling the naming process in a non-violent manner.

Morrison is concerned with how individuals are named as well. A name’s origin is as important as the name itself. The first Macon Dead was named by a drunken Yankee officer near the end of the civil war. He didn’t have to keep the name, but chose to in an attempt to wipe out the past (54). The symbolism of the “Dead” name suggests
Morrison’s opposition to whites naming blacks. Conversely, even when a name is inappropriate in a societal sense such as Pilate, the fact that it was given to her by her father confers a legitimacy upon it. The symbolism of Pilate’s earring, as well as her mythic nature, suggests Morrison’s approval of this type of authentic naming process.

Morrison is arguing against Guitar’s cavalier suggestion that “niggers get their names the way they get everything else — the best way they can. The best way they can” (89). To the contrary, *Song of Solomon* illustrates the importance of authentic naming, and that authenticity is grounded in culture and freedom to choose. Milkman’s successful journey is partially based on discovering his grandparents’ real names. Milkman must also overcome his own “Dead” name before he can be free to fly. By overcoming the nature embodied in the Dead name, Milkman is finally able to reconnect with the life-giving nature of his legitimate nickname and reconcile with the true name conferred on him by his father.

*Song of Solomon* in many ways encapsulates Morrison’s main arguments with the white Other. The overpowering presence of the white primer in *The Bluest Eye* is again examined, but in the form of Macon Dead II’s deep desires to gain entrance into respectable society. The powerful
and nameless white Other in Sula is revisited through actual historical lynchings and other brutalities committed against black victims by the white Other. But Morrison also tries to move beyond her argument with the Other to consider possible sites of reconciliation. Her first two novels offer little if any hope for such a reconciliation. She positions whites as absolute Other. She positions whites as menacing Others bent on controlling and containing blacks' movements. Song of Solomon, while continuing in many of these same veins, exhibits a subtle move away from a direct assault to a more tempered response. Morrison's attention shifts to the importance of [re]connecting with one's own history. Milkman is not consumed with the white Other. His quest is to discover his roots, his family history. Guitar is consumed by responding to the menacing white Other, and, as he is destroyed by an ironic reversal of fate, he becomes what he hates most. Morrison is suggesting that before a reconciliation with the white Other can occur, blacks must first [re]connect with their own histories without any place being given to the power, threat, or needs of white culture.

White people are not Morrison's main concern in her fiction. In fact very few white characters populate her
fictive world at all. But the presence of a white Other is very evident throughout Morrison's work. This presence, along with its rhetorical implications, continues to unfold in Morrison's later novels. The white Other continues to buffet, influence, and seek to control an African-American population that it considers Other. And Morrison continues to reveal the soul of authentic African-American culture within the borders of a hostile land. According to Morrison, "For the most part, the literature of the United States has taken as its concern the architecture of a new white man" (Playing 14-15). Morrison does not attempt the creation of a new black man, or women, but instead repositions the "new white man" as to help reveal the realities of African-American experiences in America.
WORKS CITED


