

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* As a Prose Version of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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Abstract

This paper tries to explain the intertextuality between Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The study discusses characters, settings, allusions, events, and themes in both of these literary works to affirm that *The Bluest Eye* is a prose version of *The Waste Land*. While Eliot criticizes the ideology of European people, Morrison criticizes the ideology of White Americans who cause pain and suffering for the Blacks. She highlights African Americans' trauma of oppression, and the spiritual decadence of society. She dramatizes and criticizes the social, cultural and racial injustice that dehumanize Black people.

Key Words Toni Morrison; T.S Eliot; Intertextuality; Fragmentation; Rebirth.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* depict and criticize the chaotic, fragmentary and confused world. While *The Waste Land* "paints a picture of the disjointed and barren world" (Rhee 4) of white European society, *The Bluest Eye* paints a similar picture of the African American world. As being postwar works, they both reflect a sense of disillusionment and frustration. Harold Bloom argues that *The Waste Land* is a "testament to the disillusionment of a generation, an exposition on the manifest despair and spiritual bankruptcy of the years after the World War I." (Bloom 40) Using Bloom's words, *The Bluest Eye* is also a testament to the disillusionment of the Black people, and an exposition on the despair and bankruptcy of injustice that African Americans went through. While Eliot criticizes the ideology of European people, Morrison criticizes the ideology of White Americans who cause pain and suffering for the Blacks. She highlights African Americans' trauma of oppression, and the spiritual decadence of society. She dramatizes and criticizes the social, cultural and racial injustice that dehumanize Black people.

The opening section of *The Bluest Eye* parallels the opening section of *The Waste Land* which is entitled "The Burial of the Dead." The poet deviates from the tradition because he depicts a lifeless land in spring time (April.) which contrasts Chaucer's fertile land. In Eliot's poem, "April is the cruellest month" (Line 1) whereas in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, it is the time of pilgrimage and rebirth. On the other hand, Morrison deviates from the norm as she begins her novel with the traditional story of Dick and Jane, and rewrites it without punctuation in the first time and without spaces in the second time. This makes them unintelligible to "emphasize the dislocation between the White-Dick-Jane mythology and the norms of black experience." (Peach 34) Morrison and Eliot resist traditional literature that represents happiness and coherence. The world for them is fragmented, illogical and incoherent. Accordingly, their works discuss the emotional and spiritual sterility of the life of people who are leading a death-in-life existence.

"The Burial of the Dead" discusses the spiritual and actual death of multiple people. *The Bluest Eye* also begins and ends with multiple deaths, like the death of Cholly (Pecola's father,) Pecola's baby and the marigolds that never grow. In "Lorain, Ohio: A Wasteland," Trudier Harris argues that Morrison creates an environment and a landscape in which infertility is the norm. (Harris 68) Harris asserts that "her depiction of the cycle of seasons without growth, from autumn to summer, evoke, in their mythological implications, comparisons to the legend of the Fisher King and to the world T. S. Eliot creates in *The Waste Land*." (*Ibid*) Morrison emphasizes that the infertility of the land is a result and a reaction of nature towards the injustice and chaos of the world. In the prologue, Morrison begins with describing marigolds that do not grow. Claudia, the narrator, says, "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941." (Morrison 3) She gives the reason of this strange phenomenon saying, "that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." (*Ibid*) That all the marigolds in the town do not sprout, indicates that nature punishes people because of their decadence. Claudia indicates that "the earth itself might have been yielding." (*Ibid*)

The barrenness of the land of *The Bluest Eye* is like that of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The land lacks water, plants and animals, (except for rats, crickets, cicadas, bats and dogs.) This land has "no water but only rock/ Rock and no water and the sandy road." (Lines 331, 332) In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shifts from one season to another. She starts with Autumn and ends in summer. These seasons of infertility became "a metaphor for a larger condition that wears away at the very foundation of society." (Harris 68) By setting her novel in a black society and alluding to the myth of the Fisher King, Morrison "emphasizes even more the need for rites of renewal, for rebirth, a rebirth from within the community as well as outside of it." (*Ibid*) Accordingly, Morrison discusses the idea of rebirth by connecting the events of the novel with the fertility myths.

Like Eliot, Morrison uses other myths, like the myth of Ovid's Philomel, to discuss the process of victimization and dehumanization of innocent people. The novel is a "sequence of rape, madness and silence," (Miner 7) and it is made clear when Morrison connects the character, Pecola, with the myth of Philomel. Pecola

who is raped by her father parallels Philomel who is raped by her brother-in-law. Pecola is not only violated by her father, but she is also spiritually violated by the mistreatment and disrespect by other characters, like Junior, Soaphead, her teachers and classmates. Accordingly, Morrison's use of myths raises the issue she discusses to reach a universal level. She comments on committing incest. She speaks the unspeakable to be the first step in the healing process. Moreover, Morrison "exposes to public view the painful collective and private shame and trauma suffered by black Americans in our race-conscious and wholly racialized American society." (Bouson 7)

In *The Bluest Eye*, The conversation of the prostitutes, Miss China and Miss Marie, on sex recalls the conversation of Lil and her friend in *The Waste Land*. The woman seems to be giving Lil advice to "make yourself a bit smart" and that "You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique." (Line 156) She warns her if she does not take care of how she looks, her husband will leave her. On the other hand, in Morrison's novel, Miss China says to Miss Marie that boys stopped meeting Marie because she is old. In the poem and in the novel, sex is passionless. The sexual life of the characters of the novel, (like that of Pauline and Cholly, Geraldine and her husband, and Soaphead and his wife) are characterized by lust and boredom. This parallels what happens in *The Waste Land* where sex is emotionless. A female speaker says, "Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over." (Line 252) She does not feel happy in the sexual relationship.

Both of *The Bluest Eye* and *The Waste Land* are polyphonic. The multiple voices in the novel enhance the theme of the fragmented and chaotic world. Narration involves many narrators, like Claudia as a child and later on as a grown-up, the omniscient narrator, Pauline (Pecola's mother,) Cholly (Pecola's father,) Soaphead and Geraldine. Eliot also uses many voices like Tiresias, Madame Sosostris, Lil and her friend, and many other unnamed speakers. Both of these literary texts are also structured by fragmented parts in order to reflect dislocation, gaps and alienation. Fragmentation is a strategy that Morrison and Eliot use to shed light on the fragmented world and the fragmented individual.

In *The Bluest Eye* and *The Waste Land*, time is fragmented. The events fluctuate between the past and the present. The past and the present are mixed together. Narration includes many flashbacks. The characters are imprisoned in their past. Most of Morrison's characters cannot overcome the atrocity and humiliation that White Americans practice on them. For example, Pecola's parents are negatively overwhelmed by the past. Their shame and trauma of the past destroy their personalities. At the same time, they are obsessed with White standards, and deny their roots. Pauline, Geraldine, Cholly and Pecola see themselves ugly because Whites see them like that. Linden Peach defines Blackness as related to the past as "a contrast partly of the character's own making but mostly social, based on white definitions of blackness that associate it with violence, poverty, dirt and lack of education." (Peach 35) This is the past experience of the Blacks.

Eliot uses many allusions to classical and ancient literature. Accordingly, Eliot's and Morrison's texts focus on the past because "going forward involves going back . . . securing the future means redeeming the past." (Brooker 54) Accordingly, the healing process begins with accepting the past. In order to go on, they have to acknowledge the past. Morrison and Eliot have an "intense consciousness of crisis . . . a consciousness of the breakdown of notions of historical continuity." (Spanos 226) Their art expresses the consciousness of their world.

People in *The waste Land* do not actively interact with each other. Their lives involve meaninglessness, despair and failure of communication. It is a world void of love and passion. It is only a world of lust. One of the female voices asks her lover to speak to her saying, "Speak to me. Why do you never speak, Speak." (Line 112) This is similar to the failure of communication among Morrison's characters. Claudia says, "no one speaks to me, or ask how I feel." (Morrison 9) Geraldine and all the Blacks at large have suffered from "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions." (Morrison 81) Lack of love and loneliness are recurrent themes in the novel. Morrison's characters are like *The Waste Land* dwellers who are "walking round in a ring " (Line 56) in a world of "a heap of broken images." (Line 22)

At the end of the novel, Pecola is left alone. She keeps talking to herself saying, "you don't talk to anybody. You don't go to school. And nobody talks to you. . . Even Mrs. Breedlove [her mother] doesn't say anything to you." (Morrison 196) Morrison shows that "racism and colonialism fractured relationships between mother and child." (Peach 45) She loses people's trust. She cannot find any person who can understand her. Her father rapes her and her mother does not believe her when she tells her about it. When he rapes her for the second time, she remains silent because she knows that her mother will not listen to her. Pecola escapes her hardships by retreating to madness and schizophrenia. By this only, she can have the blue eyes that she longs for.

Morrison's Pecola and Eliot's Tiresias are similar and different at the same time. Tiresias says, "I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives,/ Old man with wrinkled female breasts." (Lines 218, 219) He is both a man and a woman. Tiresias and Pecola have two persons in each one of them. They are schizophrenic. Moreover, Tiresias is biologically blind, but he has vision. On the other hand, Pecola is spiritually blind, but she has eyes. She loses the sight of herself and her surroundings and "the damage done was total." (Morrison 202) Pecola who "stepped over in madness, a madness which protected her from us" (Morrison 204) is like the madness of Hieronymo, in *The Waste Land*, who becomes mad by the murder of his son. These two

cases of madness are related to the father-child trauma. To escape trauma, some people become mad because they are helpless and weak, or what happens to them is too hard to stand.

According to Morrison and Eliot, the solution for this suffering includes many steps. First, people have to go back to the past, accept it and then learn from it, as Claudia says, "it was time to put all the pieces together," which is similar to Eliot's "Shall I at least set my lands in order." (line 426) Morrison makes it clear that the solution is not to go to hypocrite people who misrepresent religion, like the misanthropist Soaphead who uses Pecola to kill a dog that he is afraid of, nor to be frustrated and burn everything in order to forget their problem and misery, like what Cholly did when he burns the house (fire and burning are also mentioned in Eliot's poem.) The solution is clear in Claudia's words "we were not free... We were not compassionate ... Not good ... We courted death to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life." (Morrison 203) Accordingly, the second step to heal society is through love, compassion and being good and brave. They have to control their lives, and the ones who "rearranged lies and called it truth" (Morrison 203-4) should bravely face their reality. These ideas recall Eliot's Latin "Datta. Dayadhvam.Damyata" (Line 433) which respectively mean (give, have compassion and control.)

The novel and the poem end with a glimpse of hope. Eliot ends his poem by the Hindu word "Shantih," (line 434) which is repeated three times. He uses this foreign word to indicate that the solution is "willed but not achieved." (Eliot's note) On the other hand, the novel ends with a similar way. Claudia suggests that people should stop believing that "the victim had no right to live." (Morrison 204) However, the speaker knows that people in her town will not do this or "it's too late" (*Ibid*) for them to do. To change their situation, people have to change themselves. To make the soil good "for certain kinds of flowers," "certain seeds" and "certain fruit," (*Ibid*) it has to be mixed with the three fertilizers (love, giving and control.)

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