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hereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjane: An Analysis of Parenting and the Dick and Jane Readers in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Rachel Roseman
Albright College

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At the heart of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is an indictment of both the American educational system and popular culture for perpetuating a dichotomy between white culture and black experience. Most notably through allusions to the Dick and Jane reader, Morrison highlights how American education and culture are directed towards white middle-class families. Those who cannot identify with the Dick and Jane reader subsequently become "the other"—those who are alienated simply by being, such as the Breedloves. They internalize the values taught by Dick and Jane, reinforcing an unachievable white standard of beauty and life, thereby reinforcing the caste system of the master narrative. *The Bluest Eye* is about dependency on society for identification, self-value and the subsequent cycle of violence that emerges when one is alienated from developing self-worth. The Dick and Jane reader symbolizes what is detrimental about the entire education institution; the Breedloves learn their hatred and physical violence by means of learning to hate themselves. If the Dick and Jane reader embodies goodness and whiteness, and the Breedloves have no other vision of what life and family should be, then they have no other choice but to assume the antithetical role to white goodness. Morrison suggests that the complexity of the African American spirit is fraught with white tensions, putting sanity, love, and family in peril.

The novel opens with three iterations of the same excerpt from the Dick and Jane reader, representing three different lifestyles presented in the master narrative and therefore emblematic of different racial interpretations. The first is presented as grammatically correct and therefore white:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. The kitten will not play. See mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. His is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (1)

The Dick and Jane reader becomes the model for literacy, love, beauty, and acceptance. Pecola, therefore, desires blue eyes for the love and acceptance that come with whiteness. The second iteration of the same narrative is presented without proper grammar; the message still clear, but less comprehensible:

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the

green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane the kitten will not play see mother 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 see the dog bowwow goes the dog do you want to play with jane see the dog run run dog run look look here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play. (2)

The final iteration runs completely together, signifying how there is no room in Western society for the Breedloves:

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejanehasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoesmeowmeowcomeandplaythekittenwillnotplayseemothermotherisverynicemotherwillyouplaywithjanelaughmotherlaughseefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmilingsmilefathersmileseethedogitgoesbowwowlooklookherecomesafriendthefriendwillplaywithjanetheywillplaygoodgamejaneplay. (2)

The passages above demonstrate how the Breedloves are indoctrinated into a society in which the “American dream” is unattainable. The idyllic white house, cat, dog, and happy family are not meant for people such as the Breedloves. Morrison’s three versions correlate to the three different families presented in the text—the Fishers, MacTeers, and Breedloves respectively. The Fishers embody the Dick and Jane ideal upon which everything else is judged, the MacTeers, though desperately struggling to keep in house have a strong support system, and the Breedloves, who act out the antithetical existence of Dick and Jane. The different iterations of the passage demonstrate Morrison’s critique and commentary concerning the damaging effects of the master narrative’s prescriptive details for a successful life.

Nothing in the master narrative occurs in a vacuum so therefore to understand why the Breedloves manifest their lack of physical beauty into a physical violence that permeates the text one must understand the backstory of each character. The reader comes to acknowledge that the abuse Pecola endures is not meant to dehumanize Pauline and Cholly. Rather, their anger stems from failed attempts at communicating pain and the true perpetrator is Dick and Jane; the entire community, education system, and society that indoctrinate individuals into a white model of life is to blame.

Pauline’s foot deformity welcomes the reader into her backstory. Morrison writes, “this deformity explained for her many things that would have otherwise

been incomprehensible: why she had no nickname...why she never felt at home anywhere...her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (111). Pauline, unlike Dick and Jane, possesses no understanding of what family or self-worth means. To know the meaning of love is to be loved first, unconditionally, which is something none of the Breedloves experience. Pauline meets Cholly, who celebrates what makes her different, "instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending it was not there, he made it seem like something special and endearing" (116). Cholly and Pauline try to lose themselves within in each other, to fill each other's gaps; however, wholeness can never exist if it is not modeled. When their relationship is later strained, Pauline looks to Hollywood to fill the gaps of her existence, "I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy, and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could of cried. There I was, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then" (123). The Breedloves cannot experience fulfillment because they do not understand love, and they do not understand love because the Dick and Jane reader is not catered to them. When Pauline tries to lose herself in movies and model herself after Jean Harlow, which for all intents and purpose, is a substitute for Jane, she literally falls apart. The gap in Pauline's front teeth symbolizes the gap between her reality and her white desires.

Whereas Pauline cannot find solace in her physicality or marriage, she finds it in her job at the Fisher household, "power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household. They even gave her what she never had—a nickname" (128). Since Pauline's fantasy of looking like Jean Harlow was a failure, she finds a new fantasy world with the Fishers. The humiliation and isolation stemming from her lame foot as a child dissipate at the Fishers, especially since they give her a nickname. The Fishers offer her something not even her family did, acceptance. The Fisher's calling Pauline "Polly" affirms the association of whiteness with goodness, and she therefore disavows her own black family.

Cholly also endures humiliation, but to a greater severity than Pauline. Although all of the Breedloves have difficulty claiming an identity beyond their ugliness, Cholly is abandoned at only four days old, thereby denying him a stable identity. As an impressionable child, he recalls a man breaking open watermelon at a picnic, "God was a nice old white man, with long white hair and little blue eyes...it must be the devil who looks like that...if the devil did look like that, Cholly preferred him...the idea of the devil excited him" (134). Cholly doesn't necessarily identify with the devil, but with "the other." If he cannot identify with God, then the opposite must be true. God and the Dick and Jane reader are good and white so therefore to be "othered" by these images is to identify with their oppositions. Try as the Breedloves might, they can never become white, because they are black. Therefore, things that are white are out of reach and the only thing within reach is black, but only evilness is black. Cholly then supposes he should

be evil because he internalizes hatred and the notion that if society says something about you, you must prove it true.

The passage that encapsulates the caste system of the master narrative is the aftermath of Cholly's metaphoric rape:

He cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred towards 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 conscious 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...for now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. (151)

The Dick and Jane driven society mandates a caste system which ranks individuals in order of power and importance: white man, white woman, white boy, white girl, black man, black woman, black boy, black girl. Cholly cannot direct his anger towards the hunters, those truly responsible for his rape, because he understands the lack of authority he possesses. For this reason, he takes his anger out on Darlene, the only person ranked beneath him that he could control. Cholly's rape solidifies his total failure; not only does he fail to meet white standards by being black, but he also fails the standards of men. He is indoctrinated into a role of protection and provision by being male, to fail is to therefore be emasculated.

Pecola's rape and mental disintegration are inherited, her self-loathing has been passed down generation to generation. Pauline's physical abuse and Cholly's sexual abuse of their daughter is not an inherent act of monstrosity, but an act that has been beaten into their souls and psyche's in the same way the Pauline "beat [into her daughter] a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (128). The Dick and Jane excerpt that represents the Breedloves is run together and incomprehensible because the white ideal has been relentlessly beat into Pauline and Cholly; the rhythm of the text mirrors the ever present pounding unachievable ideal. One must not focus solely on act of rape, but delve into why that rape occurs in the first place. The Dick and Jane reader motif symbolizes the white ideal of life, love, and beauty in American society, emphasizing how one is indoctrinated into believing the ideal true. Pauline, Cholly, and subsequently Pecola are not born with self-loathing, but they are taught it. The rape of Pecola is the culmination of years and years of white tension in the African American identity. Morrison does not condemn Pauline or Cholly for their atrocities, but indicts the American education system and society in its entirety for continuing to perpetuate an "American dream" that alienates an entire race of individuals.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Book, 1994. Print.