Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye: A Haven of Harlots

“[W]hat’s the use of putting on something you got to keep taking off all the time (55)?” Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye tackles the ignominy of a post-slavery America by highlighting the scar on its history that fails to heal, because it cannot heal with an empirical understanding of its origin and present function. In the text, the prostitutes are erected as a satirical apparatus in exposing the capitalistic agenda disfavoring black society. Marie, China, and Poland dutifully play their role as a cesspool of iniquity, meant to re-affirm the coveted mores of the time, but the trio assert their own identity by latching on to an authenticity of self. This re-claiming of self-hood posits an alternative to the white-centric capitalistic set up of society by asserting the traditionally disenfranchised to revolt, a revolution that is undetected because of its guise of “disgrace”. This can be found by analyzing the aesthetic practice of language, which delineates the symbolism connoted of money and female-body commodification, and why/how Pecola inevitably fails as a possible rendition of the trio’s values of authenticity.

The whores in the text’s Lorain, Ohio told stories that were “breezy and rough”, a characterization that also encapsulates the way they exist: careless and crudely explicit (57). They flaunt themselves, speaking without censor and without any tribute to propriety. Their haphazard use of slang and colloquialisms further strengthens the divide between them and self-asserted morally righteous society. The names “China” and “Poland” are evocative of countries, ones that have historically played roles on an international scale. Naming the prostitutes “China” and “Poland” draws a telling parallel between the disenfranchisement of women and the vulnerability of pillaged states, usually characterized in feminine terms as helpless and in need of a (masculine) savior, a nostalgic appropriation of chivalric customs. A primary examples of this is the precarious status of Poland during (and before) World War I and World War II, notably being susceptible to invasion by Germany and undergoing more than a century of partitions by Austro-Hungry Empire, Russia, and Germany. This continuous overcoming of defenses can be perceived as a weakness, a term traditionally equated and gendered as female.

In The Bluest Eye, the prostitutes avow an aggressive tactic of subversion against males, proclaimed as their antagonists. In other words, they are waging an open war with men, to seek what they are “owed” (55). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, “vengeance” is “retributive infliction of injury or punishment” (1a), it is an agentic behavior that justifies one’s claim to counter-action. Historically, women have been placed in a self-contradictory position, bearing the burden of being susceptible of sin, thus inciting the corruption of their male counterparts. Prostitutes are notoriously stigmatized for this, and even though their business is a transaction between two parties, the male clientele is largely overlooked as an equal participant. “[T]hese women hated men, all men without shame, apology or discrimination (56),” utilizing the connotatively negative identity of “whore” as a means toward reclaiming what they have been denied: power, the distinct linguistic dialect used to convey this further asserts an authenticity that simultaneously attempts to reconcile the “problem of the color line”, as proposed by W.E.B. Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk*.

China’s rhetorical question to Marie, “Then why he left you to sell tail? (55)” is unrefined in its delivery, but almost deliberately so in its resistance to the proper grammar and phraseology of white society, maintaining its gritty flavor of alterity attributed to non-white minority-hood. Also, the question posed by China embodies the lack of alternatives available to not just whores but all the disenfranchised groups, “left to sell tail (55)”, re-inventing the human body as a lucrative good and a service, as a means of getting by. Taking this one step further, “vengeance” sought by the prostitutes inconspicuously works to re-claim an elevated position of self, re-claiming what is owed to them.

Perceiving this as an exemplar of capitalistic ideals, the traditional set-up situated slaves as chattel, merely a cog in the larger scheme of industrialization with white people as the private sector that owns the means of production. Similarly, prostitution is not controlled by the workers but is held by the wielders of the shame and stigma, society at large. Whips, chains, and lynches are replaced by derision, “fallen woman” campaigns, and scapegoating tactics meant to absolve society of its critical role in such atrocities, thereby exposing its own “ugliness”. The effect, however, is much the same in that power has remained in the hands of the oppressed. Of course it may be argued that prostitution can be consensual, a woman (usually) knowingly becomes a streetwalker. However, what is at stake here is the social atmosphere that allows for such a possibility. While slavery and prostitution differ, prima facie, the underlying component that conjoins them are the social conditions of body commodification and the subversion of the initial power dynamics as proposed by the China, Poland, and Marie in the text.

In Morrison’s piece, the whores hold the reins of the operation, asserting that the worker controls the means of production in a power shift analogous to a coup d’état, albeit a carefully latent one. Prostitution as a social institution is a commodification of the body, placing a monetary value on human beings, much like the dehumanizing enterprise of slavery. Here, self-actualization is not found by dismantling the system, but by re-interpreting that system and one’s place in it. It is a renegotiation of meaning that legitimizes the oppressed by re-charging them with a sense of individualistic entitlement. Although the prostitutes are now free to create a space outside the rigid stipulations of society, to form a counteractive sub-culture that exists as a foil to the pretentious blacks, this alternative proves counter-productive and will be short-lived or will not be politically manifested except in small circles, such as the one that encompasses Poland, China, and Marie. However, this progressive ideology fails to “move” Pecola, instead merely “touching” her on a surface level.

If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voice any alarm (57).” Conclusively, Pecola had expressed desire to “live the life they did”, not in a literal sense, but an ideological, though that desire was not brought to fruition. She wanted to travel, break free from the image of perfection society has positioned in opposition to her, but circumstance and the historical baggage of that have since patented the rights on “beauty” are an uphill battle an impressionable child is bound to fall victim to. Self-actualization, the desire of one to fulfill his/her potentials, cannot be attained due several antagonizing factors. First, Pecola’s age is not yet mature enough to process the complexity of the politics surrounding identity and to “find” herself amidst/against this war of representation. Also, prostitution or whore-dom is a doomed space/headquarters to perpetuate this attitude self-assertion because of its socially counter-productive label. Existing outside the “norm” mandated, prostitution nevertheless is part a binary of “un/wholesomeness” that allows for the norm to exist. In short, if there is no evil, how would one define good?

“They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence (57).” Poland, China, and Marie represent an authenticity of self that. Although not constructed via ingenuity or in a vacuum, they use the tools of their masters (“higher society”), so to speak, as a means of underscoring what is most at stake in the text: the dangerous potential of performing oneself as a cheap simulacra of an identity that had not been given ample opportunity to be first recognized, then manifested.

Rasha—

I like this paper and there are some really great moments of insight. We have some things to work on. Check out the margin comments for more detail. First, content-wise, I think that Pecola’s relationship to the whores gets rushed and is a bit unsatisfying at the end, in comparison to the depth in the earlier sections of the paper. I think part of this is that you haven’t developed a clear distinction for how you articulate the “ideology” of the whores as both “progressive” and “counter-productive” because of the “status of the label.” Therefore, how are we to positively or negatively claim Pecola’s failed entry into this group? Is it because she lacks the progressive impetus or she seeks a productive outlet more conducive to cultural norms (and we see how that turns out for her). Secondly, in terms of your writing, I want you to work for your next paper on streamlining your sentence construction. Too often, your sentences become too unwieldy and actually contradict themselves because of it. I think you are in an in-between stage that I know well from my own writing. You are actively writing to an academic audience, but in trying to gain admittance to that audience your writing can be really unclear. I realize its late in the game for this upcoming paper, but I think if you went through a process of cutting down this paper by about a ½ page just in unwieldy sentence constructions, you could then really see where the issues in clarity arise and actually develop a clearer sense of what you want to say about this progressive and counter-productive ideology. Overall, nice start, I’m excited to see where your research takes you with this. I have some ideas, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality Part I,* Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (the essay version is available online) and Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s article “Sex in Public.”

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