

The Modernist Origins of Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Although Toni Morrison states in a 1986 interview with Christina Davis that she does not like having her work described as magical realist, several critics maintain that Morrison creates works of magical realism, in particular *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1988). Indeed, all of Morrison's fiction incorporates, to various degrees, some features of magical realism, with her early novels demonstrating many of the modernist concerns that would develop into magical realism in her later works. In this paper, I will first introduce the historical background of magical realism and then discuss how Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is not only modernist but also shows the origins of her magical realism, examining a work by a representative magical realist writer, Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

I. The Historical Background of Magical Realism

Magical Realism is closely associated with Latin American and Caribbean culture from the 1920s and 1930s through the “boom” period of the Latin American novel in the late 1950s and 1960s, though the term “magical realism” was originally introduced by the German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to characterize postexpressionist art. Gerald Martin calls Latin American novels of this time (1920s–1970s) “the Latin American New Novel,” which, he asserts, was “a sui generis version of European modernism that, alone among world literatures, rose fully to the challenge of its times” (661). Unlike Europe, however, Latin America has never had a classical (bourgeois) realism in its literary history, and so with their unique history, Latin American writers wrote literally “new” fiction that was magical realism, different stories from nineteenth-century realism and early twentieth-century modernism.

According to Brenda Cooper, magical realism “arises out of particular

societ[ies] — postcolonial, unevenly developed places where old and new, modern and ancient, the scientific and the magical view of the world co-exist” (qtd. in Mance 197). Fredric Jameson also explains that magical realism is now “understood as a kind of narrative raw material derived essentially from peasant society, drawing in sophisticated ways on the world of village or even tribal myth” (302). In this way, magical realism is a narrative mode that is forced to combine “sophisticated” European modernism with indigenous, primitive culture.

In this construction of magical realism in Latin America, it is possible to posit several analogies between Latin American and African American cultures. Although Latin American countries, different from African Americans, have been influenced by the European countries that colonized them, both of their native cultures are, as Jameson terms it, “raw” cultures existing in the periphery of the so-called “centers,” and also they both have the African influence of slavery, even if to different degrees. More importantly, both of their histories are filled with exploitation, murder, and violation, which have created a body of tragic myths in both cultures. Both García Márquez and Toni Morrison integrate such mythical perspectives into folk memory and art forms like magical realism, showing what they have been feeling about the predicament of development.

As an African American woman writer in the United States, Toni Morrison undoubtedly has been influenced by the “Latin American New Novel.” In fact, she mentions in an interview that there is “an aura of magic” in Latin American novels, and realizes that she has found the same kind of magical quality in her own writing (Giddings 13). In addition, responding to the question of whose work she is interested in among contemporary authors, she answers, “I follow Márquez. I read anything by Márquez” (Jaffrey 149). Despite her disliking the term “magical realism” being applied to her work, it is clear that Morrison greatly admires this full-blown magical realist and even “follows” whatever she sees in him. From this perspective, I argue that her novels integrate certain features of magical realism in order to politically explore the problems of African American people, and describe the *reality* of her people in a way that Western notions of history and reality have failed to do. I would like to examine what Morrison ultimately tries to show and achieve by using

magical realism.

II. The Modernist Origins of Magical Realism in *The Bluest Eye*

In *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez*, Franco Moretti, discussing García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, asserts that a "study of the modern epic has two paths from which to choose: it can focus on either temporal, or spatial, extent" (236–7). It is possible to investigate *The Bluest Eye*, published only two years after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, from these modernist perspectives of time and space. First, regarding space, Moretti argues, in contrast to so-called modernist novels like *Ulysses*, which is a spatial construction, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a family saga in which history is longer, and space narrower, moving from the world into the Buendia house in Macondo (237–8). In *The Bluest Eye*, beginning with lines from the Dick and Jane series — "Here is the house. It is green and white" — the novel introduces readers to a pretty green-and-white house with a red door and the "typical" family unit therein, in contrast to a black family, the Breedloves, "a crippled and crippling family — unlike the average black family" (210). In Morrison's mimicry of the elements of the Dick and Jane story — house, mother and father, cat and dog, and friend — the novel is focused around the house, specifically around the threat of "being outdoors" (17).

Never moving from Lorain, Ohio, the Breedlove family, in contrast to the Dick and Jane family, is a place of ugliness, poverty, conflict, and violence, revolving around the protagonist Pecola Breedlove. Importantly, it can also be said that the story is defined by the space of whiteness, since *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's exploration, and perhaps most obvious critique, of the abstract notion of whiteness, where she argues against white supremacy and its ideals as normative, seeing "whiteness" only as an ideology.¹ In *The Bluest Eye*, this ideological "whiteness," that is the violence of reality, destroys Pecola Breedlove's body and mind, and ultimately makes her go crazy by forcing her to believe that her ugliness is "the 'sin' of not being white" (Stanford 89). With the destructive demands of society, also exemplified by Pecola's father's ugliness, which is "the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people" (38), she (as well as her mother) never escapes the

pull of privileging whiteness, of loving whiteness, that causes her to suffer from self-hatred. She even longs to erase her body and identity, as seen when she “disappears”: “‘Please make me disappear.’ She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush . . . Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left” (45).

This violent ideology of whiteness in its abstract form is, on the other hand, associated with “white magic,” in the words of Moretti (244). In *Modern Epic*, he considers *One Hundred Years of Solitude* as the story of an incorporation, “of an isolated community that is caught up in the modern world-system” (243): objects and people flow into Macondo from every part of the world, where the old and the new combine unevenly. In this phase of the novel, as he argues, the encounter with the world-system enriches the life of Macondo, and he calls this stage the hour of “white magic” because “the key word of modernism — *possibility* — pervades every page of the story” (244). Although in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison incorporates distant world events by setting the story in 1940–1941, during World War II, and gives three whores the names of the European and Asian fronts — Maginot Line, China, and Poland — *The Bluest Eye* is, unlike *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, not necessarily geographically open to the world. Yet “white magic” literarily functions in Pecola’s life in another way, reflecting Morrison’s denunciation of racist as well as gender ideology, as Ágnes Surányi puts it, at “the moment the US is entering a war to fight such racist ideology in the imposition of an Aryan ‘ideal’” (12).

While Claudia becomes aware of what “a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” really means when she is not able to love her own self (20), Pecola can only see herself through the eyes of her oppressors in racist society as ugly and inferior, even flawed, certainly unable to love her own self. But here the ideology of whiteness in a way leads Pecola into the world of “white magic” with future possibilities, if only through illusion. Gazing “fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” in a cup (19), Pecola sees Shirley Temple as sacred, all that beauty is, which she attempts to internalize by taking every opportunity to drink milk from the cup, and perhaps also because she believes that she could become “white” through the very act of devouring three quarts of milk. Having Mary Jane candies is also for Pecola the ingestion

of white beauty — “smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort” (50) — and she knows that “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (50). Caught in the ideological whiteness, Pecola desires blue eyes, hoping to be loved, that is, to be *seen* as belonging to society because she has blue eyes. Concerning the “vision,” at this point, Morrison asserts in an interview with Thomas LeClair:

The interest in vision, in seeing, is a fact of black life. As slaves and ex-slaves, black people were manageable and findable, as no other slave society would be, because they were black. So there is an enormous impact from the simple division of color — more than sex, age, or anything else. The complaint is not being seen for what one is. That is the reason why my hatred of white people is justified and their hatred for me is not. (127)

Pecola asks Soaphead Church, a “Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams” (165), to make her eyes blue, and finally magically has blue eyes.

Likewise, in the movie theater, Pecola’s mother, Pauline Breedlove, who also loses her self and so is unable to love herself as well as her ugly daughter, can identify with the white beauty of a movie star in the dark theater where she is invisible. Pauline is introduced not only to the idea of romantic love, but also to another idea of physical beauty, obsessed with the cinematic imagery:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went . . . Then the screen would light up, and I’d move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure . . . I ’member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine . . . Well, almost just like. Anyway, I sat in that show with my hair done up that way and had a good time. (123)

Although Pauline learns “all there was to love” and “all there was to hate” at once, the beauty of whiteness provides her with “a good time” beyond her reality that can exist only in the darkened theater, a make-believe world.

However, Moretti explains the moment when “white magic” shifts into “the

hour of black magic” as “an ‘incredible’ that is no longer bound to a whirlpool of bizarre combinations, but to the enormity of the crimes committed,” as illustrated in the train loaded with corpses in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (245). Similarly in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly’s first sexual experience is fearful and humiliating; it continues to plague him and he rapes his daughter. Underlying this incident is racist ideology, the worst “crime,” and its destructiveness, which Pecola and her mother fail to realize. Symbolically it is represented in the white candy shop owner’s gaze at Pecola, a look that provokes fear — that evokes the violence and power — of whiteness. Pecola recognizes an “edge” and the “distaste” in his “vacuum” eyes: “Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (48). Pecola is at this moment aware that her blackness also provokes fear: it is “static and dread. . . . the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (49). But Claudia recognizes the devastating effects of “white magic,” saying that “the horror at the heart of her [Pecola’s] yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (204). The last part of the novel, “Summer,” is then a powerful depiction of “black magic,” where the brutal effects of reality reach their culmination.

In “Summer,” we learn that Claudia and Frieda’s marigold seeds are sterile, Pecola’s baby dies, and Pecola goes mad. Pecola’s baby, conceived in rage, dies shortly after it is born, though Claudia gets a picture of its blackness clearly: “its head covered with great O’s of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin” (190). Approving the power of blackness, Claudia strongly feels a “need for someone to want the black baby to live — just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190). With the use of Claudia’s rebellious voice, Morrison here inserts the concept of the popular 1960s discourse of “Black is Beautiful.” However, Pecola’s baby dies, because Morrison in fact conceives that it would be difficult to remove the long-term psychic effects of ideology and prejudice in race as well as gender. So, as Claudia (Morrison) says, the story is only able

to "take refuge in *how*," not *why*.

With the death of her baby, Pecola starts to go mad and is disregarded by the world, no longer *seen*, except by her illusionary friend. But with her now-blue eyes, that is, the only identity she manages to have, Pecola can see herself/her self before her madness is complete: "You are my very best friend. Why didn't I know you before? *You didn't need me before*" (196). Here in Pecola's act of seeing the self, set in the form of conversation, we can look into her consciousness, which, written in italics, reminds us of Benjy Compson in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Using the stream of consciousness of mental retardation, Morrison attempts to more realistically show Pecola's overwhelming feelings, and her inner voice.

The description of madness also seems to be associated with the "uncanny," which Ato Quayson discusses as one of the distinctions to be made with regard to magical realism. Concerning the uncanny, according to Quayson, in the face of persistent physical or social violence, perceived disorders are internalized as guilt, inexplicable terror, or a general sense of disquiet which does not seem to have a clear source (729–30). From this idea, we can understand Pecola's madness as uncanny due to her violent social context, where a new ego of ambiguous nature is constructed in the space of the uncanny, a space between anxiety and terror.³

The narrator, Claudia, declares Pecola's complete brokenness, stating that "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. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach — could not even see — but which filled the valleys of the mind. (204)

Ironically, because she consistently believes in a "miracle," Pecola in the end gives in to the power of the illusion, failing to realize that the miracle which "could relieve her" only perpetuates the illusion (46).

Thus, Morrison describes "black magic" as the negative effects of racist ideology, exhibiting her very realistic concerns. It is after all a reality imbued with poverty, hatred, and violence, as can be seen in Pauline's experience in the

movie theater. After she “had a good time” and takes a big bite of candy, Pauline’s dream is proved as unattainable as Pecola’s: “Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. I still went to the pictures, though, but the meanness got worse. I wanted my tooth back” (123). Along with the lost tooth, the illusion of absolute beauty that Pauline encounters in the movies immediately disappears. Furthermore, although she names her only daughter after a character, “Peola,” in the movie entitled “Imitation of Life,” hoping to share in that ideal beauty, her baby seems a “cross between a puppy and a dying man”: Pauline knows “[the baby] was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126).

In relation to the movie theater, Morton Levitt points out in García Márquez’s stories a difference of perspective between realism (in *Evil Hour*) and magical realism (in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). For example in magical realism, Levitt observes, the movies in Macondo are *merely* illusion to their viewers, and the mayor explains in a proclamation that

the cinema was a machine of illusions that did not merit the emotional outbursts of the audience. With that discouraging explanation many felt that they had been victims of some new and shiny gypsy business and they decided not to return to the movies, considering that they had already too many troubles of their own to weep over the acted-out misfortunes of imaginary beings. (223)

The movies in Macondo thus takes the role of perception in confirming banal reality, which is, Levitt says, “the very nature of realism,” not simply a business enterprise or a form of entertainment to escape reality (75). Here is a very different point of view from that of the European modernists.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia certainly has the same perspective as the Macondo people when she becomes aware of what “a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” means and destroys the baby doll. But as seen in Pauline’s experience, the movie theater in *The Bluest Eye* is essentially in keeping with European modernist perspectives, a space in which to overcome and escape from destructive violent reality, in contrast to the theater in Macondo where “the audience . . . would not tolerate that outlandish fraud and they broke up the seats” (223). Providing the illusion of not only beauty but also wealth

and happiness in the movie theater, Morrison simultaneously reveals how cultural authority as represented by Hollywood has excluded African American people.

Regarding the illusion in the movie theater, the "imaging" reminds us of two key features of magical realism to be accounted for in relation to the location of the uncanny: "the general instability of the perceived world" and "the nature and range of the blurring of boundaries between the animal and human world" (Quayson 730). Although Quayson explains that in both features, magical realism normalizes the uncanny, Morrison's case is different, at least in *The Bluest Eye*. In the former, as we have seen in the movie theater, she uses instability as a means to establish a desire for normalcy (whiteness), rather than to support the uncanny. What's more, when Morrison describes Pecola in animal terms (for instance, she is born "a cross between a puppy and a dying man" and becomes like "a winged but grounded bird" in her madness), Pecola is always a disgusting and awfully "ugly" black child to all the people of the community, unlike in magical realist texts where the sense of the uncanny would be suppressed and Pecola would be quickly normalized. This vision is also exemplified in the European modernist "Metamorphosis"⁴ by Kafka, where although Gregor Samsa himself still has humane impulses, his family, specifically his father, is *forced to* repress his disgust at Gregor's transformed uncanny bug shape. With the same kind of perspective, Claudia describes Pecola's uncanniness as "all of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" (205), though she knows there is nobody to cope with it simply because "the victim had no right to live" (206). Morrison thus explores and critically depicts a discursive source for the uncanny in society between 1940–41.

This crucial year in *The Bluest Eye* is narrated in a similar form to that of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. According to an analysis by Vargas Llosa, beginning with "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice," the main event is mentioned at the start of the story. The narrative then goes back to the mentioned past, from which point the events are chronologically narrated and proceed to where the story begins (Morreti 242). In this circular form, we can perceive the interplay of various periods of time, and

more importantly, the story offers a “peculiarly unforgettable quality,” where an event is announced long before it takes place, and then recalled long afterwards (242). However, at the end of the story, when the circle is closed, the last male Buendía, Aureliano Babilonia, is completely absorbed into reality, and recognizes that time is incorporated into their lives by deciphering the parchments:

. . . he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror Before reaching the final line, however, he had already understood that he would never leave that room, for it was foreseen that the city of mirrors (or mirages) would be wiped out by the wind and exiled from the memory of men at the precise moment when Aureliano Babilonia would finish deciphering the parchments, and that everything written on them was unrepeatable since time immemorial and forever more, because races condemned to one hundred years of solitude did not have a second opportunity on earth. (416–7)

Macondo and the Buendías, in this way, seemingly have a preordained fate, and unredemptively vanish in the end, proving the ephemerality of time, even with the dying baby with the tail of a pig.⁵ Here is the familiar modernist perception and usage of time, which can be seen in *The Bluest Eye* as well, simultaneously showing the two modernist features of time Levitt points out with regard to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: circular in its development and a function ultimately of the mind and not of the clock, not merely a measure of life’s passing (80).

In *The Bluest Eye*, with four major sections organized by the seasons, the story begins with the adult Claudia’s recollection of the fateful autumn in 1941, where the main facts are told in the present: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall in 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow . . . ” (n. pag.) Her narration then goes back to autumn of the previous year to explain what happened during the year in which the story takes place. Although the cyclical structure seems to imply the events will be repeated, it

goes downward and even toward death. In "Autumn," Pecola enters puberty with the arrival of her first menstrual period; but after she is raped by her father in "Spring," we are told in the last, "Summer," that she goes completely mad and her baby soon dies, which is associated with the death of the marigold seeds that Claudia and Frida planted. Now at the time of Claudia's present, returning to the time of her statement at the beginning, we understand *how* "nothing remains but Pecola and the underlying earth" with her baby and father dead. Beginning with Pecola's sexual initiation, the start of the cycle of life, and ending with the baby's death, there is no renewed life in the sterile land of the modern period in *The Bluest Eye*; as Claudia says, "At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late" (206).

Moreover, all of the events in *The Bluest Eye* are told from multiple perspectives in both the first and third-person points of view, which also makes the novel complex. Past and present sometimes confused, Claudia tells many of the stories as a nine-year-old child, while occasionally reflecting as an adult. The omniscient narrator tells the stories of Pauline, Cholly and Soaphead Church, though she also gives voice to Pauline. Pecola has no voice until the end, except for her conversations with her imaginary friend, because as Surányi suggests, Morrison decides to show her as a victim unable to tell the story of her rape (15). What is more important here is that Claudia switches from "I" to "we" in her final narrating. She now realizes what makes Pecola "uncanny," and that the entire community should be blamed for this reality:

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, her 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. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (205)

There is, however, no longer the resisting tone in Claudia's narration that we find before, since she now has learned to "worship [Shirley Temple]," know-

ing, though, that “the change was adjustment without improvement” (23). Thus, completely forgotten by the community, even by Claudia and Frida, Pecola is one of the victims living in the modern, isolated, sterile world, the “Waste Land,” where there is no redemption in the end, echoing the fate of Macondo and the races “condemned to one hundred years of solitude.”

III. Conclusion

There is thus an ideology of whiteness at the center of *The Bluest Eye*, through which Morrison describes the reality of her people, the violence that permeates the ordinary life and mind of black people in the dominant white culture. This illusionary belief has the power to take away people’s power to resist, rendering them destructive and tragic. Not knowing how to save one another, in fact, not only Pecola but also the townspeople are victims of the same dominant culture invented through ideological and imperialistic logic. The novel never provides any means of recovery; even the magic and miracle (in Pecola’s illusions) send Pecola into madness, in the end failing to protect her, though madness may be her only refuge. Depicting these culturally victimized black people in their violent reality, Morrison herself questions the significances of living “in a wholly racialized society” (*Playing* 12–3).

Published around the boom period of the Latin American novel, when modernism and postmodernism were combined into the unique art form of magical realism, *The Bluest Eye* contains some distinct features of magical realism. It is certain that Morrison shares a perspective of periphery of being, cut off from traditional, authoritative values, both with modernists such as Faulkner and Kafka and magical realists such as García Márquez. As we have seen, however, her novel does not yet fully ascend to magical realism, holding more strongly to modernist concerns in her representation of reality. With the use of modernist techniques and features of magical realism in *The Bluest Eye*, then, Morrison attempts to provide “victims” with some means of redemption, an effort in which we can find what we have learned to call “magical reality”⁶ in her later works.

Notes

- 1 Regarding this, see her essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-Ameri-

can Presence in American Literature," for more detail.

2 Quayson explains, based on Freud, the uncanny as "the unsettling recognition of the strange within something that is normally perceived as *heimlich* [homeliness] or ordinary" (729).

3 Based on psychoanalytic theory, Quayson mentions the psychic mechanism whereby acute social fragmentation occurs in traumatic situations, with a breaking down of the integrated ego and a new ego structure of an ambiguous nature formed in its place (730).

4 Critics often point out that Kafka as well as his Colombian grandmother's storytelling is essential to the creation of García Márquez's world. But with regard to the uncanny, Quayson indicates the difference between Kafka and the magical realists. See 731.

5 Levitt, on the other hand, points out a difference from time in modernist novels such as *Ulysses*, *The Waves* or *Absalom, Absalom!* He states: "Time here [in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*] seems still broader, more inclusive, . . . connected intimately to nature and to myth. It is in this context that what appears to be the preordained fate of the Buendías may turn out, after all, to be strangely redemptive" (80). Similarly, Moretti also mentions that the heterogeneity of historical time in magical realism is not just the sign of a complex, stratified history, but the symptom of "a history in progress." See *Modern Epic* 242–3 for more detail.

6 Levitt explains it as a reality "not limited to the representation of the surface of things or even to exploring the depths of the human psyche, a reality which defies the conventions of Realism and which offers somehow, in the process, deeper meaning, deeper insight into both surface and psyche" (75).

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