

INTRATEXTUAL TEXT INTERACTION AND CULTURAL REINTERPRETATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

PAULINA KEWES

University of Gdańsk

The present conference centers on intertextuality while in the title of my paper I refer to the notion of intratextual text interaction, which, however, is not a slip of the pen. I follow the assumption that the concept of intertextuality is functional and helpful in analyzing literature only insofar as the text itself projects the intertextual signals. It should thus prove interesting to investigate the various possible ways of creating intertextual references in literary texts. In the present paper I would like to discuss the mechanism of creating intertextual allusions in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

One of the thematic motifs recurrent in black American literature is the incompatibility of the black and the white vision of the world. White culture has been shown to undermine the stability of the collective black consciousness in numerous literary works by black writers. Its destructive impact leading to the disintegration of the black personality is also the focus of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a book depicting painful experiences of black girls growing up in a racist section of society. The central character is a twelve-year old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who, denied love and understanding by both the society and the family, eventually steps into madness after being raped by her father. As has been suggested by one of the critics, "Pecola is the most tragic victim of American racism to appear in recent fiction".¹

The significance of the white cultural domination over the blacks follows from the construction of *The Bluest Eye* which is primarily oriented towards the presentation of the textual world-model, and not the dynamic account of events. In other words, "narrative" is wholly subordinated to description. This tendency is especially visible in the interplay of two overlapping textual patterns introduced by the composition. The first of these involves the juxtaposition between the First Grade Reader and the text proper; the second

¹ A. P. Davis, *Novels of the New Black Renaissance (1960 - 1970): A Thematic Survey*, "CLA Journal", 21. 4 (1978), p. 475.

results from the temporal framing of the seasons.² Moreover, the former is oriented towards individualization, whereas the other promotes generalization. Let us now examine in some more detail the ways in which the two patterns operate.

The Bluest Eye consists basically of two major compositional units: the prefatory unit and the text proper. The prefatory unit, in turn, comprises two distinct sections; the quasi-quotation from the First Grade Reader repeated in three formally different versions, and a kind of introduction uttered by the first person narrator, Claudia. The text proper, on the other hand, is divided into four parts named after the seasons of the year, Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. This seasonal arrangement overlaps with yet another type of division, suggested through the subtitles constituted by transformed excerpts from the First Grade Reader. Let us now concentrate on the meanings implied by the compositional elements distinguished above.

The book opens with the following passage,

“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. Moher, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Faher, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bow-wow 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”.³

It is written in standard English, grammar and orthography are correct. The style is clear, simple and lucid. Particular elements of the passage are logically connected: first the house is introduced and described, then its inhabitants are presented and characterized. The reader has no problems with comprehending this short text and immediately recognizes it as an excerpt (close paraphrase?) from the First Grade Reader for children. The alleged quotation is governed by the principle of orderliness. Its stylistic and logical

² My argument has been influenced by, but is also contrary to those expressed in: J. Weever, “The Inverted of Toni Morrison’s *The Blues Eye* and *Sula*: CLA Journal 22. 4 (1979): 402-414; P. R. Klotman, “Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in *The Bluest Eye*”, *Black American Literature Forum*, 13. 4 (1979): 123-125; D. H. Lee, “The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison” in: M. Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers: Arguments and Interviews*, London & Sydney, Pluto Press, 1985, pp. 346-360; B. Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, New York, 1986, Pergamon Press, pp. 43-57.

³ T. Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York 1972, Washington Square Press, p. 7. This edition is the basis for later references of the quoted excerpts to the page numbers.

coherence is projected onto the emerging world model, one that is also neat and orderly. In this world family life is happy, parents and children are loving, animals friendly, and no financial worries cloud the idyllic horizon. The same passage is then repeated,

“Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is (...)” (BE 7).

This time, however, capital letters (except for the first one) and punctuation marks disappear. The original balance, order and correctness are shattered. The text is still understandable and intelligible but less than the preceding version. The sense of some element missing is underlined by the fact that the quotation assumes the shape of a clumsy unfinished sentence (it opens with a capital letter and is not terminated with a period).

In its third version, the Reader excerpt is virtually undecipherable,

“Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisverypretty...” (BE 8).

All the words are strung together with no spaces between them; there is no punctuation or capital letters. It is no longer a text but a chaotic jumble of vowel and consonantal symbols. Parallel to the preceding disintegration of the original quotation is the disintegration of the world-model it presents, from balance and order to chaos and disorder.

At this point it is important to observe that the break-up of the sentence which characterizes the second quotation occurs due to the violation of the code rules, i.e. the rules of the English language. The third, or run-on, version, on the other hand involves the break-up of the word (the sign itself) as the word boundaries become blurred and unrecoverable. Consequently, the three excerpts represent successive stages of textual entropy which are projected onto the world-models they engender. The significance of this process for the reading of the book is enormous. It follows from the fact that the text proper of *The Bluest Eye* becomes a demonstration of how the overall Reader model is realized (and negated) in “reality”. Central to this demonstration is the family of the Breedloves (Pauline, Cholly, Sammy, and Pecola), who metaphorically correspond to the prototypical figures of Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane. This equivalence is suggested primarily by the quasitelling subtitles of particular sections of the text. For example, the section devoted to the description of the Breedloves’ house bears the heading

“HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWHITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETTYITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTY” (BE 30),

and the one that introduced them as family

“HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHERDICKANDJANETHEYLI VEINTHEGREENANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREVERYH” (BE 34).

Hence the world of the Reader is established as a frame of reference for the characters’ reality.

The essential qualities of the Breedloves’ existence, its chaos and disorder, are suggested by the fact that the headings of the chapters are derived from the

third version of the Reader, the most chaotic and disorderly one. Just as the writing norms and conventions are absent from it, so the moral norms and conventions are absent from the Breedloves' lives. Consequently, not only does the first and "correct" version of the Reader disintegrate, but the world-model it engenders is negated and questioned by the confrontation with the world presented in the text proper. To paraphrase Robert Scholes' analysis of Wells' "The Country of the Blind," it can be asserted that macrostructure of the novel is a negation of the First Grade Reader model of the world with its happy family life. The reader and the protagonists base their expectations on the suggested model, and the text's reality betrays these expectations. It is a negation, moreover, that generates a new meaning. It effectively transforms the Reader version of family life; it shows that in the black "reality" the house is awful, the children and parents unhappy, and the animals distorted. It involves a creative activity or recoding beyond the initial negation. What Morrison's novel does, then, is to take the "idealized" quality of the Reader's version of reality and LITERALIZE it remorselessly. It turns the figurative world of the Reader into, in Scholes' terminology, a mimetic one, and shows its inadequacies.⁴

Let us now concentrate on the ironic juxtaposition of the two models and examine the "negative" correspondence between the Reader elements (parent and children figures, animals) and their individualized textual counterparts, the family of the Breedloves. The negation essentially consists in the tension between the assessments of the "correct" version of the Reader and their inverted equivalents which appear under appropriately selected headings. First of all, the part of the Reader devoted to the description of the "green and white house" is underscored by the confrontation with the house where the Breedloves live. It is so ugly and repulsive that

Visitors who drive through this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighbourhood, simply look away when they pass it (BE 30).

Moreover, the interior of the Breedloves' apartment matches the ugliness of the external appearance of the house. Similarly, the first encounter with the "happy family", ironically named Breedlove, makes one aware of the squalor, pain and lovelessness of their existence. Thus a logical link is established between their psychological, racial and social status and the condition of their lives:

They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly (BE 34).

The next subchapter presents the negative counterpart of the kitten from children's school book (BE 67 - 76). This time it is a black cat with strange blue

⁴ R. Scholes, *Semiotics and Interpretation*, New Haven & London 1982, Yale UP, pp. 73 - 74.

es, the eyes which Pecola desires and prays for. The cat is then killed in her essence and becomes a dead "witness" of Pecola's utmost humiliation. The motif of a dying animal recurs towards the end of the book. The death of an old, mangy dog

(whose) exhausted eyes ran with a sea-green matter around which gnats and flies clustered (BE 135)

is a sign for Pecola that her deepest wish has been fulfilled – that her eyes have become blue. Simultaneously, it is the moment when she steps into madness. Both the dying dog and cat are far removed from the friendly and playful creatures of the Reader.

It is also possible to detect an ironical inversion of the images of "nice Mother" and "smiling Father" (BE 88 - 104; 105 - 129). Mrs. Breedlove (Mother), among other things, is said to have beaten into her son

a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter ... a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life (BE 102),

which sufficiently defines her position vis-a-vis the ideal. Cholly Breedlove (Father), on the other hand, is seen raping (and impregnating) his twelve-year-old daughter. Finally, the friend who is to "play a good game" with Jane is identified and negated in the figure of Pecola's imaginary interlocutor, who is a product of her now insane mind (BE 150 - 158).

Ironical juxtaposition of world-models in *The Bluest Eye* rests on total incompatibility of the "ideal", epitomized by the First Grade Reader, and the "real" – the life of the Breedloves. The point is that the ideal is based on the norms, standards and values of the white middle class. Hence, it can be fully achieved only by representatives of that race and class. Varying degrees of closeness to the ideal are signalled by the gradation of correctness in quoting the Reader. The first and proper version of the Reader best characterizes the lifestyle of the Fishers, Mrs. Breedlove's employers, described as

a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative and generous (BE 100).

Therefore, they may be said to occupy the top of the scale. Then there come members of the black middle class, Geraldine and Maureen Peal, who, in their worship of money and denial of blackness are forever trying to emulate the rich whites. A lower position has to be attributed to the MacTeers (the family of the narrator, Claudia), who, though loving and relatively self-reliant, are also very poor. The very bottom of the hierarchy belongs unquestionably to the Breedloves. Their lifestyle is metaphorically expressed by the run-on version of the Reader and constitutes an ultimate negation and reversal of the ideal.

It should be re-emphasized, though, that the Reader serves as a frame of reference for the lifestyles of all the protagonists despite the fact that the most

overt one-to-one correspondence of elements pertains to the Breedlove family. As the generalized model promoted by the Reader is realized (and negated) in a variety of ways, the resulting juxtapositions produce the effect of individualization.⁵ In this way the model status of the Reader is once again questioned and negated. The dominant pattern of negation seems, then, to expose the destructive influence of the white culture on the black community; it features the negative consequences of internalizing the values and the norms of the alien (white) culture by black.

Apart from the already mentioned functions, the First Grade Reader makes the composition of *The Bluest Eye* meaningful and justifies the descriptive mode of the textual presentation. The unfolding story of Pecola is as if "cut up" into pieces introduced by the headings constituted by transformed quotations from the Reader. Due to the predominance of the Simple Present Tense and unspecified location, the text of the Reader itself, as primarily descriptive, embodies the spatio-temporal dimensions of "always" and "everywhere". Hence the world-model it engenders is endowed with static, "unchangeable" qualities. Consequently, it stands in sharp contrast to the "particularized" here and now of the textual reality.

Relative insignificance of the action conceived of as a dynamic sequence of events unravelling before the reader's eyes is also suggested by the second constituent of the prefatory unit, the narrator's "introduction". Claudia, the first person narrator, offers a quasi-summary of the plot. She alludes to Cholly raping Pecola, her resulting pregnancy, and the death of her baby. The strategy whereby the temporal order is reversed and the outcome of the action known from the beginning is called prolepsis.⁶ Prolepsis "replaces the kind of suspense deriving from the question 'what will happen next?' by another kind of suspense, revolving around the question 'how is it going to happen?'".⁷ In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia, the narrator, says,

There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how (BE 9).

Thus the opening prolepsis undercuts interest in the action and draws the reader's attention to the emerging world-model ("WHAT IS") as the conditioning factor of "WHAT HAPPENS". In this way the answer to the question 'why?' emerges as a metaconclusion from the interaction between the Reader and the text proper.

Essentially descriptive and not narrative thrust of *The Bluest Eye* is further pronounced in the construction of the plot. It is clearly a plot of revelation, the

⁵ Cf. the family of the MacTeers, Geraldine, and Maureen Peal.

⁶ G. Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, Ithaca 1980, Cornell UP, p. 67.

⁷ S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, London & New York 1983, Methuen, p. 48.

"development" of which consists in displaying a certain state of affairs and characterizing the overall model of the world.⁸ As has been observed by Seymour Chatman, "Revelatory plots tend to be strongly character-oriented, concerned with the infinite detailing of existents, as events are reduced to a relatively minor, illustrative role".⁹ Illustrative, exemplary function of events in *The Bluest Eye* is conditioned by two factors. On the one hand, the text proper is itself an "illustration" of the Reader excerpt. On the other hand, the opening prolepsis shifts the stress from "WHAT HAPPENS" to "WHAT IS"; from narrative to description. Pecola's story is thus revealed in a series of seemingly unrelated scenes which do not follow the logic of action but the logic of illustration. It is, in fact, possible to distinguish three distinct types of scenes in *The Bluest Eye*; the covert iterative, the overt iterative, and the singulative.¹⁰

Covert iterative scenes are those which on the surface (Past Tense, definite point in time), seem "unique" yet upon closer examination turn out to present recurrent, repetitive and "unoriginal" occurrences. The morning quarrel of Pecola's parents and her visit to the prostitutes are definitely instances of covert iteration. Though unequivocally placed in time ("... a Saturday morning in October..."; "on an October morning, the morning of the stove-lid triumph..." (BE 35, 43) they are shown to be just examples of habitual, repetitive situations:

An escapade of drunkenness, no matter how routine, had its own ceremonial close. The tiny undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped and classed by these quarrels. ... these violent breaks in routine that were themselves routine (BE 36).

Even more "controversial" events, such as the encounters with Maureen Peal and Geraldine, seem to conform to an abstract, subtle pattern of iteration connected with Pecola's repeated victimizations. The point is that events are made to illustrate and exemplify the general laws governing the presented reality. Pecola's tragedy may thus be seen as conditioned and determined by these laws.

The interrelation between Pecola's life and the culture dominant in the presented world comes to the fore especially in the overt iterative scenes. Pecola's trip to the candy store unquestionably belongs to this category, as it is narrated in the Simple Present Tense. The main function of this scene is to expose the incompatibility of the black and white worldviews and the resulting alienation of the black female child whose outlook on life and hierarchy of values have been shaped by white standards. The former assertion is metaphorically implied by the incompatibility of physical points of view of Pecola and the white storekeeper,

⁸ Cf. Chatman, op. cit., p. 48.

⁹ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁰ For the original terminology see Genette, op. cit.

She points her finger at the Mary Janes. ... a black child's attempt to communicate with a white adult. ... her fingertip fixed on the spot which, in her view, at any rate, identifies the Mary Janes. He cannot see her view – the angle of his vision, the slant of her finger, makes it incomprehensible to him (BE 42).

Destructive, and ultimately fatal, impact of the white values and ideals upon the personality of the black girl is suggested by Pecola's denial of her own identity. Her desire for blue eyes is, in fact, equivalent to the desire to be white:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. ... To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane (43).

Traits of the fictional world exemplified by the above quotations are either explicit or implicit in all the scenes. This domination of the "typical or illustrative scenes, where ... action is almost completely obliterated in favor of psychological and social characterization"¹¹ strengthens the descriptive qualities of the text. More importantly, it serves to better characterize the world-model in all its internal diversity.

This tendency is also visible in the arrangement of the singulative scenes, i.e. those which can and do take place only once. The linear pattern of singulative scenes is conventionally equated with the development of the action. However, the only "singulative" events in *The Bluest Eye*, MENSTRUATION – RAPE – MADNESS, create a unique pattern of iteration which can by no means be identified as "true action". Rather, each of the mentioned events signals a passage to a successive level of entropy. This scheme of rising entropy has been already implied by the three consecutive versions of the First Grade Reader. Furthermore, it is enhanced by the tension between the natural and the "unnatural" suggested by the broad compositional frame of the four seasons of the year. This is so because the values and images customarily associated with particular seasons are negated by the unnatural changes which take place in the fictional world.

Already the circumstances of Pecola's first period signal the moral disorder of her family life. It occurs when the Breedloves have been forced "outdoors" as the father, Cholly, has set their house on fire. Pecola is then staying with strangers and instead of family warmth, tenderness and understanding, she experiences pain and humiliation. She also remains ignorant of the actual significance of what has happened to her. In this sense the Reader "ideal" is negated again, especially so, that it is in autumn, the time of death approaching in Nature, that she begins to menstruate and thus becomes metaphorically capable of giving life. Winter is turned into a false spring by the

¹¹ Genette, op. cit., p. 111.

"disrupter of seasons", Maureen Peal, who comes to be another agent increasing Pecola's humiliation and sense of worthlessness. True spring, on the other hand, traditionally symbolic of new life and rebirth in Nature, witnesses the rape and impregnation of the girl by her own father. The obvious disappearance of the moral norms (code rules of society) and the following disintegration of the family parallels the breeches in the rules of the English language prompting the break-up of the sentence in the second version of the Reader. Eventually, the "fruition" of summer brings about just one fruit, Pecola's madness, as her baby comes too soon and dies. Consequently, the entropy of the presented reality reaches the level of ultimate chaos and confusion. Just as the run-on version of the Reader involves the break-up of the word, (the sign itself), so Pecola's insanity signifies the total split-up of her personality. Hence her failed quest for the new (white) identity comes to its tragic end.

So it was.

A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment (BE 158).

In the context of the presented reality the black girl, the black family, and the black worldview face destruction and disintegration due to their acceptance and assimilation of the white culture. This culture, reflected in the multiple codes, is as if imposed upon the blacks by various "institutions", e.g.:

1. by the cinema:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show ... White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses ..., (BE 97)

2. by the educational system (the First Grade Reader, Alice-and-Jerry storybook, etc.):

Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big pretty blue eyes. ... Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. ... Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes, (BE 40)

3. by religion:

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 where bad (BE 106)

The "supreme" values such as whiteness, beauty and wealth symbolized by the Shirley Temples, the Mary Janes, the Reader figures, the Alice-and-Jerries, i.e., all the cultural stereotypes created by the white middle class become subconsciously internalized by the black community. This leads inevitably to the loss of self-esteem, to self-hatred and the denial of one's identity. In this sense Pecola's individual quest for a now "blue-eyed" self is just an example, an illustration of analogous quests undertaken by other blacks.

What makes possible such a generalized expression of the tension between the white and the black cultures is the complex interplay of textual patterns.

On the one hand, we are dealing with intratextual text interaction owing to the inclusion of the Reader excerpt into the text of the novel. This excerpt, in turn, creates an autonomous model of the world whose quasi-mimetic illustration is the reality presented in the text proper. This follows from the fact that particular elements of the Reader world-model become identified (equivalence) and negated (negative correspondence) by respective elements of the textual world. On the whole it may be asserted that the text proper of *The Bluest Eye* assumes the status of a metatext with respect to the Reader excerpt. Between them there holds a specific kind of "referentiality" relationship, the former being a distorted reflection of the latter.

However, the autonomy of the Reader excerpt proves illusory precisely because it forms a part a larger entity. It thus begins to function as a complex synecdoche recalling not only the text of the First Grade Reader as a whole but also, by implication, a number of other educational programmes, handbooks, materials, as well as texts of religious instruction or diverse entertainment and advertizing strategies. In other words, it recalls a plethora of texts that constitute the general outlook of white culture. In this sense the Reader excerpt functions as an intertextual device, being at the same time an intratextual element interacting with the text proper of *The Bluest Eye*.