

The Treatment of Victimization in The Bluest Eye

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Toni Morrison's brilliant novel, *The Bluest Eye*, has attracted what I have found to be a dissatisfying selection of criticism. Articles such as Mark Ledbetter's "Through the Eyes of a Child" seem to me most damaging because they in many ways reinforce problems illustrated within the novel: problems of maintaining power structures, reinforcing societal norms, and limiting identity. These problems occur somewhat due to confusion regarding the role we play as readers, a problem we are all forced to confront when reading this book. We are brought so dangerously close to the novel's characters that there is a temptation to empathize with those characters, yet is empathy possible? And, by identifying ourselves with the cause of these problems, there is a tendency to reinforce the differences between us that can perpetuate the problematic structure. To me, the key to reading this novel is to be as open to the experience of reading as possible, to let the novel do to us what it will, but to resist using the story as reinforcement for what we already know or believe, to resist categorization of the characters into some lump sum that does not allow for difference.

Ledbetter says, "no one is immune from victimization. There are only pained victims and anesthetized victims, but there are only victims" (178). Even we, the readers, are victimized by the text itself, which violates our sensibilities by forcing us to witness violence between the characters. But Ledbetter's article provides no varying degrees of victimization, so that I, as reader, am equally victimized as, say, Pecola. And since he presents victimization as an inescapable condition that we are all born into, it is unclear what we could hope to do about it or how we could possibly make a change. It is just this fact that Ledbetter points to as Pauline's greatest obstacle:

This desperate act [that of denying her daughter] . . . names Mrs. Breedlove not a bad mother, but rather a victim of racial prejudice certainly, but

perhaps more so of a world that has lied to her, the 'ideal servant,' and told her that she could ever be other than a victim, an otherness she exposed to us—the violence of a mother disowning her daughter—causing further, more profound, ethical reflection about the lies we tell to those whom we control and in turn encourage the victim to tell herself. (183)

Certainly Pauline could not have escaped being a black woman, or being discriminated against, but to say that what makes her most wretched is that she was allowed to hope to be something other than victim seems wrong. How can we live without hope? Claudia is also a black female, and also named a victim by Ledbetter, yet her inability to escape these conditions does not seem as detrimental.

I think the key here is the way in which we read the phrase "that she could ever be other than a victim" (Ledbetter 183). Certainly this could refer to the wish not to be victimized. Yet it also says that she could never hope to be defined as something more than just a victim. Ledbetter obviously does not think that this is possible, but reinforcing a person's identity as only a victim only exacerbates the problem. If black women are seen as defined by their status of victim, what reason is there to want to be themselves? I do not wish to claim that they are not victims or to say that their victimization is not important, but that they can be more than victims. They can be strong and beautiful and as Claudia says referring to Maureen Peal, "nicer and brighter" (74). Claudia searches for what makes it good to be a black woman, not in an attempt to deny her victimization, but to resist wanting to be like Maureen Peal or Shirley Temple, and in attempt to offer incentive to people like Pecola to remain in the world in which they live. Ledbetter says, "For the victim, the right, true, and beautiful world is always other, and leaves the victim no choice but to become like the world or to vanish, silently" (186). I propose that there is another choice and that Claudia represents that choice: to stay and to refuse to become a part of this "other" world.

Ledbetter compares Claudia to Pecola, saying that, unlike Pecola, Claudia "can distinguish between the possible and impossible and 'destroyed white baby dolls' (22), quite aware that she did not have access to their privilege" (185). Though this is true, it is not her firm grasp on reality that best characterizes Claudia. Realizing the distinction between possibility and impossibility does not necessarily cure you of a destructive wish for what you cannot have or be. Claudia rips off the heads of dolls, not only to destroy them, but to understand what makes these dolls "better" than her. Although she acknowledges it within herself, Claudia resists the temptation to want to be

white. The overcoming of this desire is not only grounded in recognition of reality, either. There are women, such as Junior's mother, who give in to the desire to be white, and though perhaps they do not ever satisfy this wish, they do succeed in almost completely denying their ties to the black community.

Notice the end of the above-mentioned quote in which Ledbetter refers to "the lies we tell to those whom we control" (183). Earlier in his essay, Ledbetter refers to "those of us at liberty to define ourselves in [seasonal change's] beauty and predictability" (181). The only other times in which Ledbetter includes himself in a group are when he is referring to readers, in which case he classifies himself as victim, too. Something about this extreme identification of himself with the parties of power seems to go beyond healthy self-implication and into the realm of reinforcing power structures. After all, one characteristic of a person in power is that that person asserts his or her authority. Yet, when it serves his purpose, Ledbetter would also like to be identified as victim.

Ledbetter seems to reinforce possibly detrimental societal norms in his description of the use of seasonal change in *The Bluest Eye*. In an effort to contrast what happens in the novel against what is "normal" or expected, Ledbetter says, "the winter should be expectant and should not hold you in its moribund grip. The child's winter should be playful and the primary emotion should be anticipation" (181). This seems to me an illustration of exactly what Morrison was reacting against with her use of child primers. Reinforcing what normal "should" be, only further marginalizes those who are not deemed normal. Just as we now wonder who it is that lives within this so called "normal" family unit (as represented in the primer) and whether it hasn't become abnormal, so too do I wonder who experiences this standard of the seasons.

Ledbetter's reading of *The Bluest Eye* denies any progress in the story of black victimization. It leaves the novel among the Hollywood movies in which black characters exist only as marginalized and peripheral figures. In movies like *Imitation of Life*, only two versions of the black victim are offered: the black mother who accepts her status as victim, even embraces it and encourages her daughter to do likewise, and the black daughter who is able to pass, but learns that resisting this condition of victim will only cause pain. But Morrison is attempting to change the standard of black female representation with her novel, where she not only brings the black characters to center stage, but also offers examples (primarily in Claudia) of people who rise above their identity of mere victim, who resist bland acceptance, and question the motivations to deny their selves.

Works Cited

- Ledbetter, Mark. "Through the Eyes of a Child." *Literature and Theology at Century's End*. Eds. Gregory Salyer and Robert Detweiler. Atlanta: Scholars, 1995.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Penguin, 1994.