Innovative Redemption
Makeisha J. Lennon

After reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, readers and critics alike describe her first novel as one exploring the life of Pecola Breedlove—an eleven-year-old girl “who prays for her eyes to turn blue: so that she will be beautiful, so that people will look at her, so that her world will be different. This is the story of the nightmare at the heart of her yearning, and the tragedy of its fulfillment” (Morrison inside cover). While this evaluation of Morrison’s work holds a large measure of truth, it does not stop there. Rather, her setting, plot, and characters merely highlight the complexity of Morrison’s agenda. *The Bluest Eye* transforms the Bible in such an obvious and purposeful manner that the impossibility of coincidence exists. In fact, Morrison admitted in a 1981 interview that the Bible not only has an impact on Black people, but even more, “their awe of and respect for it [is] coupled with their ability to distort it for their own purposes” (LeClair 126).

*The Bluest Eye* exemplifies Morrison’s language by paralleling and contradicting scripture’s concepts and figures repeatedly, indicating her respect for its principles but also her capability to change their outcome for her own objective. In essence, Toni Morrison writes and revises the gospels of Jesus Christ in *The Bluest Eye* in that Pecola Breedlove’s community—like Jesus’ community—first targets and then intends to sacrifice her for its own sins. According to Mary Miller Hubbard, who titled her dissertation “Redemption Draweth Nigh: Biblical Intertextuality in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” Pecola “[l]ike Christ [was] led as a sheep to the slaughter, and like a lamb dumb before [the] shearer, so opened [. . . ] not [her] mouth” (Acts 8:32); yet unlike Christ, Pecola does not rise from the dead but enters an emotional wasteland of madness” (15). While Hubbard’s observation appears applicable at first, readers must also note that Pecola simply does not resurrect; instead, she cannot resurrect because her accusers do not put her to death. Rather, they set her free as the scapegoat to live with, and in essence live out, their accusations.

Morrison utilizes the Bible and its well-known themes and message in *The Bluest Eye* to indicate that the black community of Lorain, Ohio mirrors the Jewish community of Jerusalem during Jesus’ life; however, she implements enough contradiction through Old Testament principles to express that while the black community may search out and find a potential Christ-figure among themselves, ultimately, their salvation from sins of the white community cast upon them cannot be found in the innocent Pecola Breedloves of the world because unlike Christ—the sacrificed goat—Pecola becomes the scapegoat. Often these separate roles have been expressed as one, yet ironically they oppose one another. Morrison’s intertwining of these roles in Pecola’s character not only addresses the obvious contradiction, but even more importantly, she confronts the greater issue at hand. The Old Testament Hebrews and the New Testament Jews searched for a moral cleansing of their sins where they would find their redemption, whereas the Blacks of Lorain await and pursue a physical and social redemption from their oppressors; therefore, if the type of redemption sought differs, then so should the means of salvation.

From the beginnings of slavery in America, white slave owners justified their actions with the Bible as their main support. Accomplished sociologist Orlando Patterson writes, “the slave and ex-slave [have] always been the
major symbol of sin in Christian theology" (210). He further explains, “First, in his slavleness he represented enslavement to the flesh and to sin. But to the social meaning of his slave status the Afro-American victim added the body symbolism of his ‘blackness’” (211). In other words, physical enslavement, spiritual enslavement, and blackness soon knit together in the minds of white slave owners, as well as the white community as a whole. Merely being born without white skin marked one as a sinner without the possibility of redemption.

Morrison makes use of the familiar argument that Blacks are inherently less than Whites because their blackness “proved that [they were] descendants of Ham,” (Patterson 211) Noah’s youngest son who God cursed and marked—supposedly with dark skin as a sign of his unrighteousness—for exploiting his father’s nakedness (Genesis 9). Morrison demonstrates this through Maureen Peals’ character, a light-skinned black girl. Claudia remembers recognizing how differently the world treated Maureen. She says, “[d]olls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world” (Morrison 74). Whithrop D. Jordan’s explanation sums up mindsets established through the passing down of these beliefs generation after generation. He shows that “traditional color symbolism, which identified whiteness with goodness, purity, and beauty, and blackness with ugliness and evil, was fused with ‘racial’ and religious symbolism” (Patterson 211). In short, blackness, unattractiveness, and sin enmeshed so completely that they become inseparable. Morrison illustrates this through the community’s response to Pecola conceiving a child through Cholly’s rape. They respond, “[o]ught to be a law, two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly” (190).

To understand Toni Morrison’s purpose in presenting Pecola as her community’s scapegoat, readers must first grasp the biblical concept of scapegoat and sacrificed goat, which stems back to the Old Testament when the Hebrews, ancestors of the Jews, annually offered their sacrifice of Atonement, which is “intimately linked with forgiveness of sin and with reconciliation to God” (Richards 110). According to Leviticus 16, during this ceremony, the community brought two male goats to the priest, and through casting of sacred lots, he decided which of the two goats should be sacrificed through the shedding of blood to cover the sins of the people. The priest then released the unselected goat into the wilderness to fend for himself. Under the law according to Moses, this type of sacrifice needed to be performed once a year, and without it, the Hebrews remained impure before their God.

The details surrounding the crucifixion of Christ mirrors this foundational Old Testament law and practice, yet one significant difference exists—Jesus’ death as the sacrificed goat was required only once. All four gospels show a mob of priests arresting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then taking him to Pilate, the Roman governor, to be punished according to their false accusations. Further, the account in Matthew 27:23 indicates Pilate’s question concerning Jesus’ guilt when he addresses the Jewish crowd after they demand Jesus’ crucifixion, “‘Why,’ Pilate demanded. ‘What crime has he committed?’” (NLT). Prior to this, Matthew tells readers:

[It was the governor’s custom to release one prisoner to the crowd each year during the Passover celebration—anyone they wanted. This year there was a notorious criminal in prison, a man named Barabbas. As the crowds gathered before Pilate’s house that morning, he asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you—Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” (NLT)

The account parallels the annual Old Testament decision between the two male goats. The Day of Atonement traditionally took place during the Passover, and Pilate symbolizes the priest who cast lots to determine which goat to execute by allowing the Jewish crowd to vote concerning which prisoner to release. Clearly, they chose Barabbas as the scapegoat, leaving Jesus to cleanse the sins of those who sacrifice Him. Moreover, Hebrews 10:10 says, “And what God wants is for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all time” (NLT). Differing significantly from the Old Testament’s annual sacrifice, Christ’s death offered permanent redemption for His accusers, as well as anyone who would accept it.

Just as the story of Christ and Barabbas further develops the Old Testament’s Day of Atonement, the narrative of Pecola Breedlove’s life also explicates an attempt of innocence being sacrificed for the atonement of the accusers. The Bluest Eye illustrates how an entire community endeavors to make Pecola in her childlike purity
their Christ-figure—a sinless man according to Paul. He writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ” (NLT). Just as the undeserving goats and sinless Christ stood before their accusers, Pecola Breedlove too experiences the results of being renounced and selected to carry sins she did not commit.

Claudia’s retelling of her childhood examples Pecola as the community’s selected goat of sacrifice for their own sin—their blackness. After Claudia explains that the entire Breedlove family demonstrates pure ugliness due to “conviction, their conviction,” she proceeds by sharing how each family member deals with their “cloak of ugliness” (Morrison 39). Pecola “handled hers as an actor does a prop: for the articulation of character, for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers—martyrdom” (39). Everywhere Pecola turns she discovers her community’s disdain for their own sinfulness in that they continually hold her in contempt for her blackness. For example, when she travels to Yacobowski’s Fresh Vegetable, Meat and Sundries Store to purchase candy with her three pennies, she recognizes Mr. Yacobowski staring back at her with “[t]he total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness” (Morrison 48). At first, Pecola recognizes this aversion among Whites, like Mr. Yacobowski, whose “distaste must be for her, her blackness [. . .] And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes,” but soon enough, she discerns a similar aversion among Blacks as well (Morrison 49).

Black children and adults alike cast their measure of sin—disguised as blackness—on Pecola, transcending the range of allegation from those who accused Jesus. Clearly the Jewish adults during Jesus’ life opposed him, yet, the Jewish children never rejected him. In fact, the opposite holds true. Children bombarded Christ for his attention so much the disciples often “told them not to bother him” (Matthew 19:13). Yet, Pecola’s peers lay blame on her in a way that Christ never experienced. Claudia recalls a scene when a group of black boys “gaily harassed her. ‘Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnedded. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps nedded. Black e mo’” (Morrison 65). Junior’s treatment of Pecola also demonstrates how others, even children, blame her for their own sins. After Junior convinces Pecola to see his house, he traps her inside, and then throws his mother’s cat “full force against the window” (Morrison 91). When Geraldine unexpectedly arrives home, Junior immediately points his finger at Pecola and declares, “She killed our cat” (Morrison 91). Geraldine does not question her son’s accusation; instead, she immediately hurrs insults at Pecola, calling her a “nasty little black [witch]” (Morrison 92). Once again, Pecola’s accusers express their accusations through condemning her for her blackness. Even more, Morrison suggests Pecola’s representation of Christ during this scene when Pecola “[turns] to find the front door and [sees] Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes” (92). Through this, Morrison indicates the attempted sacrifice of Pecola results from a more entrenched abhorrence that Whites have for Blacks than even the Romans had for Jews during Jesus’ life.

Just as Jesus Christ’s crucifixion required the betrayal of Judas Iscariot, Pecola’s attempted sacrifice too necessitates that one closest to her also offer her to the accusers; Mrs. Breedlove explicates this vital role. Matthew 26:14-16 describes Judas’ betrayal of Christ:

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, went to the leading priests and asked, “How much will you pay me to betray Jesus to you?” And they gave him thirty pieces of silver. From that time on, Judas began looking for the right time and place to betray Jesus. (NLT)

Judas hands Christ over to His accusers for the measly price of a slave according to Exodus 21:32. Pauline Breedlove, like Judas, buys into the lies of her culture and community and ultimately hands Pecola over to be sacrificed. Beginning with Pauline waiting for Pecola to be born, she fills her mind with society’s images of beauty and purity through going to the movies. Morrison tells readers, “There in the dark her memory was refreshed” (122). Openly exposing herself to societal standards through the media, [Pauline] was introduced to physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thwarted in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (122)

Just as Judas’ indoctrination of the Jewish community prepared him to buy into their accusations of Christ, Pauline prepares her view of her own daughter through the standards society portrayed through the media. Therefore, with her
mind already programmed with flashes of “Clark Gable and Jean Harlow” (Morrison 123) defining beauty, Pauline describes her only daughter as having a “[h]ead full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (126). Pauline recognizes Pecola’s so-called ugliness only after she “collected self-contempt by the heap,” resulting from comparing herself with the media’s images of beauty (Morrison 122). Having the need to rid herself of contempt, Pauline follows suit with her community and gives it to Pecola to bear as her own contempt and ugliness. Even more, Pauline’s ultimate Judas-like act of betrayal comes after Cholly rapes Pecola. Pauline’s reaction of beating Pecola following the rape indicates her agreement with the townspeople that “[Pecola] carried some of the blame” (Morrison 189). If never before, during this time in the Breedlove’s lives, Pecola needs Pauline’s support, just as Christ required Judas’ faithfulness for His survival; but for both Pecola and Jesus, in the time of greatest vulnerability, one closest to them gave in, supporting their communities’ accusations.

While Morrison parallels the lives of Christ and Pecola in that both of their communities target them as the chosen goat to cleanse their ugliness and sins to offer redemption, she ultimately diverges from Pecola as the Christ-figure and casts her instead as the scapegoat. Just as the Hebrews chose between two goats and the Jews chose between Christ and Barabbas, Pecola’s community also chooses—Pecola or her baby. Pecola is destined from her birth to become her community’s Christ-figure; every mindset and stereotype is stacked against her. When Cholly’s unthinkable actions offer the community a choice, only then is Pecola selected as the scapegoat, purely because her baby is bound to be even more ugly—therefore more sinful—than her. Claudia recalls the town gossip about Pecola’s baby, “She be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking . . . Be better off in the ground” (Morrison 189-90). When Pecola’s community casts their sacred lots, they determine that between their two choices, Pecola or her baby, that the baby deserves death more than Pecola, releasing her as the community scapegoat rather than the originally intended sacrificed goat.

The greatest irony surfaces in what occurs after Pecola receives her sentence. After her community scapegoats her, she crosses the line of madness—mental death—and moves to “that little brown house . . . on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while” (Morrison 205). The paradox subsists in that Pecola’s community never releases her as the religious leaders of the Old Testament released their scapegoat into the wilderness to survive. Instead, her community holds her captive, forever threatening to hang her on the cross of insanity, and locks her in the room of her own mind rather than releasing her to fend for herself as a genuine scapegoat, who, according to Patterson, “can survive anywhere” (219). Claudia reflects on Pecola’s role within their community; she notes, “All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed . . . All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleansed ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness” (Morrison 205). Having never been released by her community, Pecola Breedlove never gains the opportunity to survive in the wilderness; rather, her community retains her as the continuous scapegoat.

Morrison toys with both Old Testament and New Testament versions of redemption in The Bluest Eye, altering both in hopes that readers will recognize that neither suffice for the type of physical and social redemption needed by the Black community. While one may find a spiritual redemption through these Biblical sources, the Black community requires a different atonement, not one they need as a consequence of their own wrong doing, but rather one resulting from White culture openly equating their physical blackness with spiritual blackness. The Biblical story of Barabbas and Christ results in both prevailing; Barabbas finds his freedom and Christ rises from the dead. In The Bluest Eye, neither Pecola nor her baby overcome. Instead, both reap the repercussions of their society. Ultimately, Morrison’s message exists in refusing to cast roles upon the Black community according to outside influence. On the other hand, she encourages readers to defy “[t]he assertion of racial beauty [as] a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (Morrison 210).
Works Cited


