

***L'écriture féminine* in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: Questioning the social and literary standards through the use of colours, sounds, and shapes**

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***Abstract:** In her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison reacts against the American white racist and sexist society which used to exclude the black race and marginalise the female sex, mainly in the decades that preceded the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. She attempts to voice the black female 'other' through the inclusion of a new linguistic mode, an innovative feminine style which subverts the social and linguistic rules of the past. She questions the bases of beauty as well as the standards of writing, revealing that they are by the same token grounded in a subjective standardisation. She shows a break with the traditional literary canon and uses a challenging form of writing where language becomes a tool to fight racism and sexism and a political weapon that leads to the attainment of freedom and independence. This article is chiefly concerned with the use of feminine writing as a political discourse that denounces a history of oppression, while attempting to closely examine the engagingly excessive and eccentric employment of colours, sounds and shapes as a discourse of resistance. Morrison uses linguistic irregularities in her new code of writing to deconstruct the traditional regular male linguistic code.*

Keywords: body, colours, discourse, feminine writing, shapes, sounds

Introduction

As a story narrating the plight of the black community in an oppressive white world, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) criticises standard values as conceived by the white community. Even though the events of the story happen in the 1940s, before the launch of the Civil Rights Movement, the novel conveys the premises of the 'Black is Beautiful' cultural movement that emerged in the 1960s from African Americans who strove to teach blacks to love their bodies, embrace their difference, stop internalising their physical inferiority, stop believing in whites' standards of beauty and desist from imitating whites in their

style, in order to hide their 'ugliness'. Being a black woman and female writer, Morrison suffers from a double oppression exerted by the interlocking systems that define a woman's life. In her narrative, she echoes history through the reproduction of discriminatory practices against blacks and against women, and struggles to reform minds to change her present, through the contribution of the novel to the Black is Beautiful movement, by persuading blacks to accept their difference as the core of their identity.

Morrison attempts to explore the reasons behind the troubled identities of black women in a racist and sexist society that locates them in hierarchies of power and privilege. The novel can be strongly read in the context of Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, to highlight the intersection between race and gender that underlies the subordination of Black women who 'are regarded either as too much like women or Blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case Black women's Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas' (Crenshaw 1989, 150). The suffering of the female characters in Morrison's narrative springs mainly from the intersectional interplay between different identity categories like race, gender and class. The novelist brings to the fore the intersecting patterns of discrimination and shows how intersecting identities reinforce each other. Through a black feminist lens, black females are positioned within structures of power that reflect the interaction between white supremacy and patriarchy, which makes the way in which they are oppressed fundamentally different from the way in which white women are oppressed.

Although the present article is framed by a consciousness of the historical context of African Americans, it does not explore the systems of discrimination in Morrison's novel as much as it examines the writer's attempt to raise her voice and restore the identity of the black woman. It shows how race and gender are transgressed through the power of language and how the writer can capture the individuality of black women through a style that blends femaleness and blackness. If the black feminist approach offers a reading in the systems of oppression as structured by a white sexist society, the French feminist perspective provides ways of challenging those systems. Even though French feminists do not stop at the difference between black and white women in the discriminatory apparatus, they propose a reading in women's style of writing through which 'woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement' (Cixous 1976, 875). Morrison uses a feminine mode of writing that reflects her identity as a woman and mixes it with black blood, skin, features and voice. French feminist theory proffers a ground, in this context, from which to grasp a female discourse that conflates biology and physicality as a way to erase women's multiple identities in favour of the creation of women's unique subjectivity. By recounting the story of a forgotten

black girl who suffers from a crisis of identity and eventually retreats into madness as a result of an oppressive social system, the author echoes painful sounds of the past. And in order to redeem the injuries of the past and regain the loss of the black woman's individuality, Morrison uses an unconventional style of narration that perfectly fits into what French feminists would call '*l'écriture féminine*'. It is a style that allows the feminine voice to cut through the reverberations of the past by the use of words, images and sounds that display the difference between a white male text and a black female text.

Morrison discards the biased standards of beauty and of writing as a black and a writer. At the same time, she attacks the standardisation of the social values that reinforce the exclusion of the black race and reacts against the traditional male literary canon which connects writing with maleness and excludes the female from artistic creation. As a challenge to a history of domination and oppression, Morrison discusses the grounds of standardisation in a white patriarchal society and questions the criteria of physical beauty and literary perfection as dictated by a white authoritative Father. In *The Bluest Eye*, the novelist is involved in a literary project that would at once invalidate the bases of beauty and standards of writing as subjectively and one-sidedly set by the dominating white male community. The latter is bigotedly devoted to its own system of belief, after creating a cultural code that keeps women apart from the public sphere and alienates them from the realm of art and literature, to leave them permanently anchored in the world of domesticity. The same dominant group displays racial resentment towards blacks and strives to entrench that feeling of inferiority in the minds of both women and blacks. As an outcome of this oppression, Morrison endeavours to subvert social and literary standards through the creation of non-normative social criteria and a different style of writing, that proclaims rebellion against irrational dictated laws.

The concern of the present article is to show how Morrison is engaged in a political venture that aims to overcome the resonating moans of the past, create a sense of identity and restore self-confidence among black women, through her use of the feminine as a rebellious literary mode that transcends traditional discourse. The focus is mainly on the manifestations of the feminine in relation to the themes of the narrative, wherein the theme of black beauty is conveyed through the use of three inviting symbolic elements that strikingly unite to add a feminine whiff to the text. These elements that help boost the novel's unmasculinity, irregularity and non-normativity are colours, sounds and shapes. They are appealing because skin colour, black music and black female physiognomy have a bearing on the context of racism. Moreover, they are a part of the text's feminine style, a mode of writing that intends to disturb the traditional order and deconstruct the absolute truths imposed by a white male ruler. These textual feminine signs are in unison with the idea of revising standards and transcending the rules; their inclusion in an unusual cocktail in

the novel might be political, aiming at integrating the black character as a new standard of beauty and the feminine style as a challenging way of writing.

This article breaks with previous critical works that generally engage with a thematic approach to uncover the themes of racism and gender inequality in the text, and adopts instead a different reading method to extract the themes of the novel and divulge Morrison's rebelliousness. The plot, setting, structure and representation of the characters are analysed through the thoughtful examination of the use of the carefully chosen elements of colours, sounds and shapes. Even though some critical works reserve particular attention for the uncharacteristic style of the novel, the present article creates an unprecedented attentiveness to such overlooked textual detail, which absolutely functions within the context of introducing a ground-breaking feminine mode of writing. The analysis of these three elements is based on Hélène Cixous's notion of '*l'écriture féminine*' as a counterpart to phallogocentric masculine writing. Through this notion of feminine writing, Cixous argues that women writers do not merely reproduce the phallogocentric system of stable ordered meaning, which has already excluded them, but also include a new signifying system, a system characterised by more play and fluidity than the rigid existing traditional order.

Firing the male literary canon

A strict division of roles based on sexual difference was traced in patriarchal societies; while men were associated with creation and production, women were connected with procreation and reproduction. Therefore, the dominating male denied women their artistic talents and deprived them of their rights to contribute to public life. This 'male transgression and subsequent female silence' (Bloom and Miner 1990, 87) created a great sexual imbalance in society and placed women as passive subordinates to men. Harold Bloom and Madonne Miner comment on this social division:

Men, potential rapists, assume presence, language, and reason as their particular province. Women, potential victims, fall prey to absence, silence and madness. (1990, 90)

Man used to consider himself a perfect writer who had to conform to a set of male-made rules and norms, which constituted a whole literary tradition. Lizbeth Goodman describes this firm belief in male literary perfection, claiming: 'men's writing (and nearly always white, middle-class men's writing in English) was positioned as "the norm", presented as if it were Literature, with a capital "L", somehow representative of all "great writing"' (Goodman 1996, ix).

Once woman could no longer tolerate social and artistic exclusion and found it hard to succumb to a masculine linguistic code, she sought ways through which she could express her indignation and voice her repudiation of such a

despotic system. She displayed a zealous combative spirit through engagement with a new shift referred to as 'firing the canon'. This is a feminist stream based on:

a re-evaluation of the standards by which authors and texts have been singled out and 'canonized', followed by an active search [...] [which] may lead to previously 'hidden' texts by women, people of colour and working-class writers. (Goodman 1996, ix)

Feminist thought 'has pointed out the historical "silences" of women authors not included in the "canon" [...] in order to shake up static views about women's creative work and domestic roles' (Goodman 1996, x). It has worked on 'the project of "breaking the silences" of under-represented groups' (Goodman 1996, 148). According to Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, feminist thought is a rebellion against 'a long masculinist tradition that identifies female anatomy with a degrading linguistic destiny' (1989 [1985], 82). Feminist thinkers dig into women's texts to substantiate signs of femininity that go against literary conventions. Modern female writers display an awareness of the necessity of breaking the grounds of male traditional discourse through the inclusion of the 'new "woman's sentence"' for which Virginia Woolf appealed (Gilbert and Gubar 1989 [1985], 89). That new feminine mode of writing is often referred to by French feminists as '*l'écriture féminine*', as coined by Cixous. If Morrison adopts that style, it is to announce her rebuff of male standards of writing.

French feminist critics strive to authenticate the linkage between the use of language and the social and literary exclusion of women. They presume that texts evincing a different linguistic style seek 'to resist submission to patriarchal law by exploring a different mode of discourse that arises not from the Symbolic but from the Imaginary Order' (Booker 1996, 91). Jacques Lacan's Mirror stage and Julia Kristeva's Symbolic Order are defined as the moment of the child's recognition of itself as a linguistic entity, when it starts to classify people on gender basis. It shows fear of castration and obeys its father, 'relinquishing access to the *jouissance* of infantile fusion with the mother' (Booker 1996, 91). This is the process of the child's separation from the mother and identification with the father as the consequence of a forced recognition of its gender. Lacan thinks the Symbolic is 'the point where sexuality is constructed as meaning' (Mitchell 2000, 390). Language marks the transition from the pre-Oedipal or the Semiotic to the Symbolic, as Kristeva endeavours to explain in her book *Desire in Language* (1980). Lacan assumes that people get engendered through language and argues that there is an unflinching connection between language and sexual difference; therefore, language is vital in determining the subject's sexual identity. Based on Lacan's theory, French feminist philosophy bears the assumption that feminine discourse which extensively relies on the non-linguistic or the pre-verbal is able to deconstruct the myth of gender, as constructed through language. Writers who use a semiotic language, close to the

realm of music, rhythm and murmur, are able to re-fashion language in order to turn it into a means of de-gendering rather than engendering.

Luce Irigaray believes that it is necessary to erase the simple oppositions of theoretical systems. For her, to write the body or '*parler femme*' is 'to confront and displace this masculine "movement", to escape its definitions and confines to attempt a reformation of the Symbolic' (Millard 1989, 161). Although Irigaray does not rely on Lacan in her theories, because, as she claims, of his focus on the primacy of the phallus, she contends in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985b [1977]), as in other works, that the rules of syntax and grammar are a masculine construct. In her extensive empirical research, she demonstrates that language was modelled by patriarchal culture upon the male Symbolic Order, where any irregularity or multiplicity was deemed to tarnish its integrity. Contrary to male standards, which stabilise and rationalise language through a regular and linear narrative pattern, female discourse is distinguished by non-linearity, irregularity, instability and multiplicity. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985a [1974]), Irigaray connects the corporeal with the linguistic, believing that woman must produce a multiple and unfathomable language because she possesses a multiple body, as shown in her multi-orgasmic response. That feminine style advanced by some feminist scholars relies on multiplicity, excess, non-linearity, imagery, female corporeality and eroticism. Yet woman's sensitivity to colours, music and non-standard shapes in the novel creates an additional feature of the feminine.

As some feminist theorists claim, the traditional male sentence used to be colourless, dim, solemn, regular, strictly conforming to grammatical and syntactic rules, clearly carrying fixed meanings and measurably put in ready-made moulds. The colourlessness of the male sentence originates from the regularity of its structure: grammar, semantics and syntax are highly respected, according to a previously imposed linguistic code. According to Cixous, this kind of writing is marked within the Symbolic Order that is structured through 'dual hierarchical oppositions', including man/woman (Cixous 1989, 101). The phallogocentric discourse 'has always worked through opposition: Speaking/Writing — Parole/Écriture — High/Low' (Cixous 1989, 101). This binary system is the source of the orderliness and somberness of the male sentence 'in which the feminine is always repressed' (Klages 2001), and which lacks flexibility, variety and openness, and thus colour. As a result of man's arrogance and possessiveness, woman has felt it necessary to inscribe the feminine principle in her works, to proclaim her breaking of the law and revolt against the unique god of literature. Cixous describes the power of language written by women, saying: 'It is in writing, from woman and toward woman, and in accepting the challenge of the discourse controlled by the phallus, that woman will affirm woman somewhere other than in sentence' (1989, 111).

Morrison seems to apply to her novel what Cixous calls 'changing the rules of the old game' (1989, 116). This article extensively relies on Cixous because of the total correspondence between her theory and Morrison's text. Characterised by a non-linear structure, non-standard English and disorderly linguistic entities, and overcharged with a feminine note, musical tone and conversational tenor, *The Bluest Eye* conforms to Cixous's definition of feminine writing as 'scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things and values around, breaking in, emptying structures' (1989, 116). The shrewd combination of the elements of colours, sounds and shapes helps constitute the presence of a feminine discourse in the novel through which she expresses her challenge to racial and sexual exclusion. Their joint thematic and stylistic function makes them strikingly attack sexism and racism all at once. Thematically speaking, they can be an attempt to turn white standards of beauty upside down, first by playing on the symbolic use of colours in relationship to race, secondly by including oral black heritage within American culture, and thirdly by favouring the frizzy hair and dense shapes of black traits over the delicate and steady physical features of the whites. On the stylistic side, the presence of these elements serves to subvert male literary traditions by providing colourful imagery and metaphorical language, foregrounding the spoken and discarding the regular shape of the written text.

The use of colours as a sign of the feminine

The use of colour in Morrison's narrative can be perceived in a literal and metaphorical way. Literally speaking, an abundant use of different hues, with their symbolic functions, can be traced. In a metaphorical way, colour can be detected through the radiating effect of the text; this radiation comes from the writer's elaborate weaving of metaphors and images, creation of a special linguistic code and reliance on the open nature of language. At this level of analysis, it is necessary first to handle the literal presence of colours, and then to deal with the metaphorical 'colour' produced by the feminine sentence, which complements the argument.

Colours are so copiously present in the text that the reader barely encounters a single paragraph devoid of them. The reader's visual perception of colours starts from the title of the novel, where the reference to the colour blue makes them anticipate that colourism is the subject matter of the text, especially given that it is written by a black writer. Shifting to the prologue, which reverberates with Dick-and-Jane passages, the reader comes across an aberrant reiteration of the colours white, green and red:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. (Morrison 1990 [1970], 1)

Based on Jack Tresidder's statement that the 'colours that attract our attention most are red, yellow, green and blue (those preferred by children)' (1997, 50),

the colours chosen in these primers can be the colours most preferred by children and may therefore allude to Pecola, the novel's protagonist. Morrison deliberately builds her narrative around the connotative clash of colours that exists in the Dick-and-Jane passages and decides to take that meticulously-studied assortment of colours as a point of departure for the whole narrative. Symbolically speaking, the colour white could denote peace, 'light, purity and joy', as in some religious and cultural contexts, green stands for fertility and vegetation as found in certain myths and cultures, and red is, if we rely on Tresidder's account of colours (1997, 50), 'usually linked with the life principle, activity, fertility'. The idealised image of the white middle-class family represented through the use of these bright and cheerful colours stands in contrast to Pecola's dim and tough milieu. The prologue tends to reflect the novel's general theme of the exclusion of blacks, and foreshadows the tragedy of black girlhood, embodied in the personal experience of Pecola.

The deeper the narrative weaves its way through the four seasons, the more the reader collects a generous crop of colours. The reader becomes more and more focused on their presence and heedful of their symbolic functions. The repetitive references to specific colours such as white, blue, yellow and pink play a key role in reflecting the central theme of the novel. These colours are identified by the white hegemony to be criteria of physical beauty, while black-skinned people are considered as an emblem of ugliness; even blacks themselves are driven to thoughtlessly trust these absolutes. When Claudia says, 'All the world has agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 14), she flawlessly interiorises these racist ideas. The 'ugly' Pecola is similarly enchanted by the 'blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 12), and is hence crazed with a wish for blue eyes. If one assumes that the colour blue stands for 'the sky, therefore the spirit and truth', as claimed by Tresidder (1997, 50), we can admit that Pecola's yearning for blue eyes symbolises her need for the care and affection any child needs. The decayed conditions of Pecola's family life impel her supplication for those blue eyes that would save her from misery and take her to a utopian world where she would find eternal happiness. If the colour blue stands for 'the sky', it may translate Pecola's childish idealisation of a non-existent world. Tresidder's reference to 'the spirit and truth' makes the reader think about the clash between Pecola's spiritual quest for an idealised world and her descent into a degraded real world.

Since, aesthetically speaking, colours, with their brightness and vividness, can be connected more with femininity, Morrison makes her female characters sensitive to colours. Pauline uses colours when she describes her romantic experience with Cholly. Despite the sordid picture of Pauline's marital life, the quarrels and exchange of violence between her and her husband and in spite of the cruel character of Cholly, who ends up raping his own daughter, Pauline records scenes of love and passionate moments of intimacy with her spouse. She

repeatedly adorns her talks about her former sexual life with colours to express her joyful mood and sexual pleasure:

When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all bits of color.
[...] My whole dress was messed with purple. [...] All of them colors was
in me. (Morrison 1990 [1970], 90)

The use of colours romanticises and invigorates the narrative of Pauline, who feels happy with her own body and amorous in her sexual adventures. Pauline seems 'intensely responsive to color and visual images — the yellow lemonade with seeds floating in it, the streak of green made by the June bags, the purple of berries, and the rainbow after sex' (Melani 2009). Colours, in the text, turn into a medium of writing the female black body, with its sensuality, intimacy and ecstasy, and create a spectacular carnival that celebrates black femininity and shows blackness in colours, despite the bitter reality that surrounds the characters' lives.

Morrison spins an untraditional connection between colours and sexuality. The reference to 'the rainbow after sex' shows an unconventional way of handling a taboo topic. The rainbow contains all bright colours, which stand for exuberance and excitement. Pauline summons up all colours not only when she reports her love story with Cholly, but when she recalls her sexual experience too: 'I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me — deep in me' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 102). Colours are used in a romantic context to reflect Pauline's joyfulness, euphoria and *jouissance*: 'Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors' (101-2). Pauline's vivid depiction of her orgasmic pleasure and sexual contentment shows that the black female body is a source of pleasure rather than of frustration. Pauline exteriorises the human side in Cholly who is drowned by his dark self and driven in a world of crime and bestiality.

The writer's use of colours to convey black women's intimate experience is destabilising on the social and literary levels at one go. There is first an attempt to subvert the prejudices connecting black people with a natural sexual savagery and beastly comportment. Despite his pervasive behaviour, due to a psychological complex grounded in his childhood, Cholly is humanised, at least in some instances, when he shares moments of romantic intimacy with his wife. Black women live ecstatic sexual experiences with their male partners and marital life seems to be characterised by an understanding of women's sexual needs. Cholly's responsiveness to Pauline's sexual desire invalidates the association of blacks with animalism and asserts a mutual gratification. Second, by charging her book with erotic scenes, Morrison transcends the boundaries of the male tradition of writing which used to eliminate such taboo subjects from their texts. Cixous describes feminine writing as 'a cosmos where eros never stops travelling' (1989, 108). For her, women must write 'about their sexuality, about the infinite and mobile complexity of their becoming erotic' (1989, 112-

13). By writing the body, Morrison attempts to show that the body is no longer separated from the text; it becomes the text itself. This is corroborated in Cixous's phrase, 'Text, my body' (1989, 111), which indicates the identity between the corporal and the textual. Chiara Briganti and Robert Con Davis elucidate the power of including female corporeality in the linguistic milieu and accentuate its political effect: 'The body entering the text disrupts the masculine economy of superimposed linearity and tyranny: the feminine is the "overflow" of "luminous torrents" [...], a margin of "excess" eroticism and free-play not directly attributable to the fixed hierarchies of masculinity' (1994, 162).

Colours are not only used in reporting sexual scenes but also in describing settings, nature and characters. Morrison colours her sentences to craft an authentic painterly sight which powerfully affects the reader. The writer paints with words a visually coloured picture in her descriptions. The reader, for instance, can visualise the carloads of slag 'smoking into the ravine that skirts the steel mill' where 'the dying fire lights the sky with a dull orange glow' and where Claudia and Frieda 'lag behind staring at the patch of color surrounded by black' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 5). Moreover, the writer utilises nature to provide a genuine pictorial perception of colours; fruits like peach, pineapple, raspberry and melon are introduced in the text to create a flamboyant pastoral picture. Colours are similarly employed to depict the characters' joyful or gloomy moods; even misery gets coloured in Claudia's description of her mother: 'misery colored by the greens blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words...' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 18). Morrison's profuse and reiterative use of colours casts on her text the vividness and brightness that are missing in the traditional male text. It marks a feature of the feminine sentence which is characterised by what Cixous calls 'feminine light', a light which:

doesn't come from above, doesn't fall, doesn't stroke, doesn't go through. It radiates, it is a slow, sweet, difficult, absolutely unstoppable, painful rising that reaches and impregnates lands. (Cixous 1989, 109)

The use of glowing, coloured images is coupled with an excess of imagery and metaphors to generate a varied and feminine language, capable of 'fight[ing] off opacity from deep within' (Cixous 1989, 109). The luminosity of the sentence does not exclusively spring from the literal reference to colours which are 'generally life-affirming symbols of illumination' (Tresidder 1997, 50), but correspondingly from the mottled imagery employed by the writer, especially nature imagery. The images of the marigold and dandelions epitomise the whole tragedy of the black Pecola. Based on the idea that the colour yellow could carry among its symbolic functions the meaning of 'corruption and degradation' (Gast 2000), as in certain religions and cultures, these two types of garden plants could be emblematic of the corrupt and degraded world which drives Pecola to insanity. The image of the ingrown sterile marigold seeds is circularly used in

the opening and closing paragraphs of Claudia's narrative to operate as a symbolic contour to Pecola's tragic tale. The failure of the marigolds shows that what destroys Pecola are the individuals and the black community itself, where the fault seems to be 'of the earth, the land, of our town' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 164). The symbolic image of dandelions equally reflects the hostility of both the society and nature to Pecola. When dandelions 'do not look at her and do not send love back' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 37), Pecola feels an outcast and realises her exclusion from the whole world.

The profusion of metaphors and diversification of imagery are set in an open linguistic context that adds more hue to the text. Morrison's language is unstable, non-fixed, irregular and open to a multiplicity of interpretations; it does not conform to previous laws of writing which assert the stability of meaning. This openness is a feature of the feminine style, where language outshines the black-and-white sentence of traditional male discourse. Cixous uses the opposition of colours to compare the multiple feminine sentence with the dim masculine one in the following statement:

Neither black on white nor white on black, not in this clash between paper and sign that en-graves itself there, not in this opposition of colours that stand out against each other. This is how it is: there is a ground, it is her ground — childhood flesh, shining blood — or background, depth. A white depth, a core [...], and this ground covered by an infinite number of strata, layers, sheets of paper — is her sun (*sol... soleil*). (Cixous 1989, 108–9)

The woman writer has a free hold of her own ground and is therefore able to create her private linguistic code. It is through her strategies of writing that the colourfulness of the discourse manifests itself, as a way to overcome the habitual grimness of male discourse.

The female writer, as Cixous claims, 'will always exceed the discourse governing the phallogocentric system' (1989, 109). Her words 'will write themselves against the other and against men's grammar' (1989, 114). Cixous goes on to affirm that 'feminine strength is such that while running away with syntax, breaking the famous line [...] that serves men as a substitute cord' (1989, 115). Breaching language rules sheds light on the text; it is that light which comes from 'deep within', from the depth of the body, of the flesh and blood. As Cixous puts it:

Let her write! And her text knows in seeking itself that it is more than flesh and blood, dough, kneading itself, rising, uprising, openly with resounding, perfumed ingredients, a turbulent compound of flying colours, leafy spaces, and rivers flowing to the sea we feed. (1989, 109)

If we compare the characteristics of *The Bluest Eye* with the general features of most classical and traditional male-authored texts, we can seize the feminine pulse in Morrison's narrative; it is varied, perfumed and coloured. Her language

transcends patriarchal logic and obeys its own order, in which a clear violation of syntax and a special use of diction are traced. More ‘play, more fluidity’ and non-linearity (Klages 2001) typify Morrison’s new signifying system, starting from the first page of the book where the primer text degenerates into formless and meaningless print with no space and no punctuation. It is a text with a non-linguistic mode, conforming to Mary Klages’s description of *l’écriture féminine* as ‘milk, [...] a song, something with rhythm and pulse’ (2001).

Unlike regular patriarchal discourse which strictly obeys semantic rules, feminine writing goes beyond the singleness of meaning to offer variety and plurality. In addition to Morrison’s generous use of metaphors and symbolism, the reader perceives a transcendence of genre boundaries, which brings colour to her text:

the novel becomes poetry. [...] But *The Bluest Eye* is also history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music. (Leonard 1970, 1)

The feminine principle disturbs the constancy of literary genre and makes it a painting of colourful blobs. The unstable feature of the narrative makes the language flow and ‘fly’, in Cixous’s term, with no fixed destination (1989, 115).

Morrison’s liberation of language implies her desire to liberate her own race from the dominance of whites. She describes, on the one hand, conflicts between whites and blacks, and reports, on the other, the discrepancy between blacks themselves. Blackness becomes a source of disgust and despise for white people, as seen in Yacobowski’s treatment of the black Pecola: ‘it is the blackness that accounts for, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes’ (Morrison 1990 [1970], 37). However, light-skinned blacks in their turn oppress the dark-skinned ones; this is an oppression based on what Geraldine calls ‘the difference between colored people and niggers’ (Morrison 1990 [1970], 67). These inter-racial exclusions and intra-racial segregations are determined by the colour of skin, where colour becomes a means of domination and oppression. As a reaction to this colour-based view, Morrison strives to turn colour into a means of liberation rather than domination, by imbuing her text with a hodgepodge of colours, associating colour with sexual pleasure, making language unfixedly fly and breaking the boundaries of orderly discourse.

The use of sounds as a feminine feature

The colourful feminine sentence in *The Bluest Eye* is branded with rhythm and musicality whereby writing and voice become tightly interwoven. Cixous describes the voice as an emblem of the feminine:

First I sense feminine in writing by a privilege of *voice*: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing’s continuity/voice’s rhythm take each other’s breath a way through interchanging, make the text gasp or from it out of suspenses and silences. (Cixous 1989, 110)

The reader of the novel is enabled to hear the voice and sounds that are intermingled with the written script. Corresponding to Cixous's description of *l'écriture féminine*, Morrison's writing 'can only go on and on without ever inscribing or distinguishing contours, daring these dizzying passages on other, fleeting and passionate dwellings' (Cixous 1989, 108). The feminine floating sentence seems like the feminine laughter of Marie which 'came like the sound of many rivers, freely, deeply, muddily, heading for the room of an open sea' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 40). By recording the musical flowing laughter of one of her female characters, Morrison matches the female laughter with her feminine sentence.

Music and songs get in the way of the narrative and play an integral part in the life of the characters. Claudia portrays her mother's hypersensitivity to music and emphasises the interconnection between her emotional state and music:

if my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and some body-done-gone-and left me times. (Morrison 1990 [1970], 17).

Music touches all the social categories of the black community, including Poland the prostitute who is 'forever singing'; she sings 'I got blues in my meal barrel...' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 39). She never quits her daily singing, in spite of her hidden suffering and state of dejection caused by others' disdainful gaze. Music as an integral quotidian habit dwells within Morrison's fictional characters as in the black community as a whole, either in their joyful or hard moments:

Music is important in Morrison's novels and in the Black community. The Blues are an outlet for feelings about hard times and a source of comfort. (Melani 2009)

In addition to the presence of music as a theme in the book, the reader discerns the musical features of language itself. The writer's employment of a poetic language and stylistic devices such as alliteration, assonance and consonance creates rhythm and musicality in the text, as this sample sentence shows: 'they [blacks] fussed and fidgeted over their *hard won homes* [...]; they *painted, picked, pocked* at every corner of their houses' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 12, emphasis added). Onomatopoeia is similarly a highly noticeable feature in Morrison's language; examples like the 'clucking sounds of adults' (1990 [1970], 13), the 'whirr' of wheels (1990 [1970], 35), 'the clic-cloc of the women's heels' (1990 [1970], 120), and 'the "prop" of the beer-bottle cap' (1990 [1970], 41) make the reader hear the sound and feel the music of the word. Likewise, musicality is shown through the author's dexterous choice of rhyming words that are arranged with great harmony, as in the following sentence: 'the Candy Dance was a humming, skipping, front tapping, eating, smacking combination...' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 59). Morrison's inclusion of the

fragmented, sporadic and uninhibited feminine mode of writing becomes more visible when she once again attempts to blur the boundaries between literary genres. Borrowing from poetry while writing fiction makes the text a melting entity comporting all literary genres.

The sound effects are not only paralleled with the effect of heteroglossia in narration, but also detected in the characters' speeches themselves. An acoustic imitation of sounds can be perceived in the following examples of the reported oral performances of characters: Frieda 'made a *phtt* sound with her lips' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 18), Pecola produces a 'whinnying sound' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 19) and Claudia's mother says:

Oh-Uh-huh-Uh-huh. Playing nasty, huh? (Morrison 1990 [1970], 22)

The reader freshly catches the sounds through the vivid reporting of characters' conversations and gestures. The reader, for instance, witnesses Frieda's beating scene when the power of the sound goes beyond the script to reach out to the reader's ear, while imagining the slapping of the mother's hands on Frieda's frail body when she shrieks:

No, Mama. No, ma'am. We wasn't! She's a liar! No, ma'am, Mama! No, ma'am, Mama! (Morrison 1990 [1970], 22).

Similarly, the musical tone of the black boys' insult to the poor Pecola can be heard through the pauses between the syllables or the long-breath phrases:

black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked... (Morrison 1990 [1970], 50).

These sounds well up in the surface of the text, coming from an inner corner of the body, from 'the depth'. Morrison speaks from the body, expressing and writing it, and aligns herself with Cixous's recommendation that 'woman must write her body' (1989, 113). Morrison's text reproduces the sounds and imitates the rhythm and flux of the human voice as a sign of the feminine, which is also identified as:

voice! Exclamation, cry, breathlessness, yell, cough, vomit, music. (Cixous 1989, 112)

The text is replete with rhythm, music, intonation and orality; it comes from 'within' the body, from the throat and the mouth. As Cixous puts it:

text, my body [...]; it is the equivoice that, touching you, affects you [...], it is the rhyth-me that laughs you [...]; the part of you that puts space between yourself and pushes you to inscribe your woman's style in language' (1989, 111).

Morrison's invention of the feminine flowing, musical and free sentence comes to disrupt the regular, linear and gauged male discourse. It subverts patriarchal sensibility and messes up its orderly linguistic line, in a desire to liberate woman from cultural fetters.

The text is also impregnated with recordings of characters' use of vernacular language. Unlike male writers, who fear that the 'vernacular that their mothers, wives, and daughters also frequently speak [...] might seem to vulgarise their noble subjects' (Gilbert and Gubar 1989 [1985], 92), Morrison provides a lively account of the oral tradition of the Afro-American community. She reports the verbal insults exchanged between Pauline and Cholly and records the gossipy conversations between black women. As the opening of Claudia's narrative, the expression 'quiet as it's kept' echoes a rite in storytelling and represents a common initiation phrase among women, to launch a story or a talk. This concern for orality is one feature of feminine writing where the reader is once again able to hear the voice, which Cixous describes as follows:

Voice-cry. Agony — the spoken 'word' exploded, blown to bits by suffering and anger. (1989, 112).

Morrison seems to speak from the Imaginary Order; she produces sounds and babbles like those of a baby who has not yet entered into the Symbolic Order. Gilbert and Gubar claim that 'Women's imaginary languages arise out of a desire for linguistic primacy and are often founded on a celebration of the primacy of the mother-tongue' (1989 [1985], 95). Therefore, Morrison's instillation of spoken Black American English in her text is a way to fight the exclusion of the black race and a means to incorporate the cultural heritage of blacks into American literary language.

The use of shapes to write the black female body

The defiance of white male standards of writing parallels the challenge of white standards of physical beauty. Morrison questions imposed criteria of beauty which consider white-skinned and blue-eyed people as the beautiful race. The Breedloves 'wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 28). The author provides a detailed physical description of the Breedloves, where she cannot see their ugliness:

The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular headlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. [...] You looked at them, wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. (Morrison 1990 [1970], 28)

To participate in the campaign of 'Black is Beautiful', Morrison makes blacks' physical non-normative features, which are described as 'irregular', 'crooked' and 'insolent' in the above passage, signs of self-indulgence for certain characters. China, for example, is 'forever curling her hair' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 39), perhaps to show that the irregular shapes of curls are a mark of

beauty rather than ugliness. She is aware that even in her commerce of illicit sex, these very curls remain appealing to her customers. In a similar way, Marie, another local whore, narcissistically admits the attractiveness of her own curly hair, saying:

I'm rich and good-lookin'. They [men] want to put their toes in my curly hair. (Morrison 1990 [1970], 40).

To set that world of whoredom aside, these women's self-admiration stands against Pecola's self-loathing and her internalisation of the white gaze. Morrison seems entranced by the 'irregular' features of black people and deems them emblems of prettiness against the groundless standards created by whites. John Leonard succinctly illustrates this idea:

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black; the wasting is done by a cultural engine [...]; *The Bluest Eye* refers to the blue eyes of the blond American myth, by which standard the black-skinned and brown-eyed always measure up as inadequate. (Leonard 1970, 1).

Irregular shapes such as curls and spirals are also used metaphorically in the narrative to uncover a desire for non-linearity and a longing for freedom; a detachment from a history of condemnation and dictation of standards. Instances from the text are: 'the scraps and curls of the laughter' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 81); the music which 'spiraled around the tree trunk' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 105); 'the clear sharp curves of air' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 7); and the words which 'move in lofty spirals' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 9). Morrison's fondness of these swerving shapes goes hand in hand with her use of the feminine writing which is 'never simple or linear' (Cixous 1989, 110). The female writer excludes the traditional regularity of the male discourse and includes instead an unsteady mode of writing.

Furthermore, Morrison seems to represent the cultural identity of blacks through the description of their physical features. By highlighting the flat nostrils, curly hair, thick lips as common facial features of blacks, like those of the Breedloves, and by stressing black women's large hips which make men assume that they 'will bear children easily and painlessly' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 65), the author makes a link between physiognomy and culture. These defining physical features of black people reinforce their racial belonging as well as their cultural identity.

Nevertheless, since the physical traits of blacks go against the white norms of beauty, some black women indulge in an imitation of these normative standards. To show the desire to fight the funkiness of being black, Morrison refers to the migration of Mobile girls to the urban areas of the North. The change of environment weakens their cultural belonging, especially when they attempt to mimic the northern physical and cultural norms. Seeing that they have

an unpretentious physicality, these black girls strive to be extremely neat while using consumer products for whitening and defect concealment: 'when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 64). They struggle to get rid of their funkiness, 'the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions'; they wish to 'wipe it away' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 64).

This category of blacks contributes to self-exclusion in a process of self-effacement; they are subconsciously motivated by self-loathing, a feeling which originates from a conviction of prejudiced white standardisation.

In her novel, Morrison censures the assimilation of the rules of white culture by the African American community, which seems lost within this popular subjective ideology. The black woman is caught in a feeling of self-aversion by adopting white standards of beauty. With her dark skin, kinky hair and fleshy hips, she places herself in an ungrounded comparison with white women, while blindly believing in her ugliness and strongly assuming her physical inferiority. Morrison exposes the perils of this crisis of identity and shows that the self-doubt of the black woman effaces her racial and cultural identity and makes her abandon her cultural belonging and sustain her specious appendage to another culture. Morrison hankers for a black woman who unfetters herself from these prejudices and delights in seeing her own charms: 'We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness' (Morrison 1990 [1970], 57). Morrison's contentment with her blackness and pride in her race and African heritage lie behind her questioning of the bases of ideals of beauty just as her sexual vanity exhorts her to wonder about literary standards.

Conclusion

Morrison proves to be subversive in theme and style while striving to find room for Afro-American culture within white hegemony. At the same time, she asks blacks to maintain their communal ties, preserve their racial belonging and hold on to their cultural identity. At the stylistic level, she displays a break with traditional literary canon and uses a feminine mode of writing through which language is liberated. The liberation of language is synchronised with the writer's keen desire to liberate her own race and sex. The concoction of colours, sounds and shapes is an aspect of feminine writing in *The Bluest Eye*. The writer creates a visual perception through her use of colours, literally and metaphorically. Multicolouring functions as an ironic countering to colourism. It is through colours that Morrison succeeds in writing the pleasantness of the female black body. The excessive employment of colours is also a feature of feminine discourse that tends to destabilise the dim and regular traditional male text.

As far as sounds are concerned, the narrative sustains acoustic properties by imitating the human voice first and conveying a strong sound effect second. Funk, blues and jazz are taken as a theme in the novel; music is feminised due to its vitality for the narrative's female characters. Music is equally used as an aesthetic feature to ornate the text with rhythm and pulse. Since musicality is more connected with women and since it does not adhere to the male solemn discourse, it becomes an emblem of the feminine. Likewise, the preference of spiral and coiled shapes contributes to the writing of the female black physiognomy while attempting to subvert the male standards of beauty. Mingling the corporeal with the linguistic creates a powerful mark of feminine writing. This article endeavours to show how the feminine weaves its way along the narrative through the inviting combination of these three signs of rebelliousness. Colourful sentences, rhythmical sounds and irregular shapes merge harmoniously in the text to include a purely feminine style that helps fight racial and sexual exclusion.

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