

Interwoven Voices and Visions: Analysing Narrative Techniques in Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye'

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ABSTRACT

Morrison's literary approach involves a departure from standard narrative forms, as seen by the adoption of a retrospective narrative style, the inclusion of many narrators, the deliberate use of syntactic structure with punctuation, and the deliberate manipulation of time and place. This study provides an objective analysis of the Afro-American novel, *The Bluest Eye*, authored by Toni Morrison, a contemporary female writer. The study aims to demonstrate the distinct elements of storytelling techniques and their impact on the development of plot and characterization in the novel. The study also examines several elements of narrative approaches and their influence on the narrative, using content analysis. The novel's characterization and story structure have been significantly influenced by the distinctiveness of its tactics. Toni Morrison employs a juxtaposition of white and black characters, as well as individuals from different social classes, and utilises the imitation of European ideology and native Black English as a means of communication. The use of 'polyphonic', 'multi-voiced', and multi-layered narrative techniques has rendered the novel distinctive, while simultaneously enabling the novelist to effectively communicate its underlying meanings to the readers.

Keywords: *literary approach; syntactic structure; elements of time and place; plot and characterization*

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is a highly regarded modern Afro-American author who was awarded the prestigious 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. The narrative style in *The Bluest Eye*, one of her most popular novels, is essential for comprehending its intricate and multi-faceted storyline, which is exclusive to her writings. Morrison employs the narrative of Pecola as a means to portray the experiences of Afro-American black individuals, so highlighting the existence of several black girls who grapple with an inherent and enduring sense of inferiority (Abdul, 2020). The novel *The Bluest Eye* depicts Pecola Breedlove, a black girl who experiences isolation, self-destruction, and social exclusion. She develops a mental illness due to her desire to possess 'blue eyes'. The story explores the dynamics between her mental breakdown and the actions of certain black people who are more actively engaged with white culture than she is. She examines the experiences and characteristics of black women in a society that is characterised by racism, patriarchy, and male dominance. The use of narrative techniques by writers serves as a means to imbue a story with certain creative and emotional impacts.

An analysis of the story's components, including character, speech, perspective, manipulation of time and location, tone, mood or atmosphere, symbolism, style, stream-of-consciousness technique, and topic, is of great importance. The narrative voice in the work alternates between different characters. The author employs distinct narrative strategies to portray many components such as language features, form characterization, feminism, psychoanalysis, black culture, the concept of beauty, self-destruction, racism, violence, and other related themes. Understanding her exploration of a black neighbourhood in Lorain, Ohio during the 1940s and her portrayal of events that are intertwined with the social realities of racism and poverty in *The Bluest Eye* is of utmost importance. Ramirez (2013) states that the primary focus of the American white community in the novel revolves around racial discrimination, which leads to the fragmentation of identity among black individuals and has a significant impact on their self-definition. (34) Toni Morrison elucidates the adverse consequences associated with the veneration of 'blue eyes', particularly about young African-American females. The narrator thus assumes a significant part in the narrative of *The Bluest Eye*.

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To comprehend the novel and its fundamental message or theme, the prominent characteristics of the storytelling method might assist readers in a broad sense. This study aims to elucidate distinct facets of the narrative style and their impact on the two fundamental components, namely plot creation and characterization.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The authors, Mankhia and Alhusseini (2020), conducted a study titled "Stylistic Analysis of Toni Morrison's 'The Bluest Eye': A Bakhtinian Reading." Their analysis focused on the stylistic elements of the novel, employing Thornborrow and Wareing's (1998) and Leech and Short's (2007) levels of stylistics. According to Bakhtin, Toni Morrison's novel is classified as a polyphonic novel due to its use of alternating first-person and third-person narrators, whose voices interact. The narrative technique employed in the novel plays a crucial role in establishing a polyphonic structure. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as a multi-voiced narrative.

In the article titled "Narrative Structure and Moral Experience: The Narrative of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*," Hsu (2005) analyzed the moral implications inherent in the narrative structure of Toni Morrison's novel. The author identifies the presence of contrasting elements within the narrative that serve to emphasise the prevalence of white culture and propose alternative moral perspectives. The author demonstrates that the novel's asymmetric structure serves to elucidate the dichotomy between the "victims" and the "victimizer." The author analysed the use of three narrative devices, namely the narrator, paratext, and the irony of the Breedlove family name. The authors conclude that these devices effectively communicate various forms of love within Morrison's novel, and further investigate the impact of these love types on the novel's characters.

In addition, research has been conducted on the narrative tactics employed in other novels to gain insights into the study of narrative techniques and stylistics. In Prince's (2016), "Narrative Analysis and Narratology", various techniques of narration are depicted. The author engages in a critical examination of the characters, noting that the initial narrator initiates the tale and subsequently transfers control to the second narrator, ultimately returning to the original narrative. Moreover, the narrative shifts from a focus on physical exploration to a psychological one, so enhancing the reader's perception. The study illustrates Conrad's use of the retrospective approach to effectively communicate his own experiences throughout the story.

Wafula and Wanjala (2017) conducted a pertinent study titled "Narrative Techniques in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*." This study aims to analyse and illustrate the use of distinct technical elements by Achebe to enhance the appeal and captivation of his novel. The narrative method employed in *Things Fall Apart* serves as the cohesive framework. The researchers contend that Achebe employed strategies that facilitated his efficient communication of the dominant concepts in his novel. The author establishes the narrative structure of the story, which serves as the foundation for the use of foreshadowing, sideshadowing, and back-shadowing techniques.

Dahiya (2013) demonstrates in "Narrative Techniques in *Wuthering Heights*" that the novel possesses a complex and multi-faceted narrative that surpasses its genre through its refined observation and artistic finesse. While the work primarily has two prominent narrators, Lockwood and Nelly Dean, there are also several more narratives scattered throughout. Tucker (2017) demonstrates in "Great Expectations: Narrative Techniques" how Charles Dickens used narrative strategies to facilitate readers' comprehension of the characters and significant topics in his novel. Dickens employs the first-person perspective, a sequential depiction of events, and captivating conversation to construct a gripping narrative. The protagonist, Pip, engages in a retrospective analysis of his life events based on his firsthand encounters.

The novel *The Bluest Eye* portrays a dysfunctional family called the "Breedlove" family, characterised by a deficiency in love, parenthood, and financial resources. The story explores how these dysfunctional elements, combined with cultural perspectives, impact the life of Pecola, a young black girl. The setting of the novel is Lorain, Ohio during the Great Depression in 1939. To convey these intended messages to the audience, she alters the techniques used to narrate the story and incorporates creative twists in the style of storytelling. The use of storytelling techniques has had a significant impact on several aspects of content and style, with particular emphasis on plot structure and characterization. Therefore, this undertaking examines the subsequent inquiries.

THE BLUEST EYE, VARIOUS NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

The use of the narrative method is a fundamental component of literary composition. The significance of analysing a literary work and its narrative method is well acknowledged. Undoubtedly, it aids readers in uncovering the intended concepts of the authors. The use of diverse narrative and stylistic aspects by the authors serves to elucidate, investigate, and objectify their beliefs or subjects. Simultaneously, the use of the narrative method in storytelling elicits specific artistic and emotional impacts. In the realm of fiction, the ability to effectively convey the narrative is a crucial mechanical skill that novelists must possess. Schorer (2003) asserts that narrative style serves as the method via which

an individual uncovers, identifies, investigates, and assesses their subject matter, and their skill in this regard defines their level of achievement (p.251). This technique refers to the method employed by authors in narrating their stories. Undoubtedly, approaches serve to reveal the underlying vision and multifaceted significance of a piece of artwork.

The field of narrative technique encompasses the examination of multiple components, including but not limited to story, plot, characterization, style, point of view, location (time and place), narration, mood, tone, discourse, atmosphere, stream of consciousness technique, and theme. Additionally, it encompasses many literary devices like as foreshadowing, flashback, flash-forward, metaphor, simile, irony, imagery, and hyperbole. The concept of the narrative method pertains to how an author presents the storyline, as well as the psychological and physical dimensions of the characters.

Mankhia and Alhousseini (2020) defines technique as a "convention" that involves the selection, structuring, or distortion of any form or rhythm imposed on the world of action. This technique serves to enhance or renew our understanding of the world of action (p. 251). The use of storytelling style encompasses both intellectual and moral aspects, effectively elucidating and presenting them. The manifestation of narrative techniques is achieved through several stylistic elements. Mankhia and Alhousseini (2020) categorises stylistics into three levels: the micro level, which focuses on linguistic form; the intermediate level, which examines the discourse dimension of texts; and the macro level, which explores the communicative contexts of texts.

In their work, Leech and Short (2007) explore further levels of stylistic analysis, such as the grammatical level, which encompasses the examination of grammar, phrases, tenses, and parts of speech. The morphological level encompasses the internal structure and development of words. The semantic level of analysis involves examining the meanings and perspectives of the characters. Pragmatics, on the other hand, involves deducing the implicit meaning inside a text. The lexical level of analysis focuses on the content words, particularly nouns and verbs, including their origin, complexity, and diachronic properties.

A narrative consists of two components: a story, which includes the content or sequence of events (actions, occurrences), as well as what might be referred to as the existents (characters, setting); and a discourse (p.19). In his seminal essay titled "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," Bakhtin (1984) introduced a novel theoretical framework concerning dialogism and polyphony. According to Bakhtin, dialogic speech encompasses a diverse range of speakers and perspectives. The dialogic novel incorporates a diverse range of talks within the text to showcase various ideas and perspectives. Within a novel, there exist numerous speeches delivered by the author, narrator, and characters, resulting in a polyphonic narrative. The book serves as a focal point where the forces of centripetal and centrifugal convergence intersect. In alternative terms, the presence of "diversity of voices and heteroglossia" is evident within a novelistic narrative. (38) In addition, the examination of narrative strategies necessitates the consideration of other elements such as tale and plot, flashback-flash-forward, backstory, foreshadowing, mood, atmosphere, tone, point of view, and setting, among others.

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Morrison portrays the narrative of numerous black females residing in America who experience an inherent sense of inferiority due to their identity issues, as exemplified by Pecola's story. They succumb to victimhood, similar to Pecola, and endure immense suffering throughout their entire lifespan. The literary work entitled *The Bluest Eye* explores the narrative of two African American families, namely Claudia MacTeer's family and Pecola Breedlove's family, as well as the environment in which they reside.

The family named "Breedlove" is ironic due to both the destructive manner in which its members express love towards one other and the fact that their destructive behaviour is an expression of self-hatred. In this instance, Morrison portrays the interconnections and dynamics inside the familial unit. The rising action takes place when Cholly Breedlove deliberately sets fire to his residence. Over time, Pecola begins to develop a belief in her perception of unattractiveness. Multiple occurrences in the narrative reinforce her conviction of her unattractiveness. Pecola, the protagonist, desires affection, although her parents and the other individuals in her society harbour animosity towards her, resulting in a significant struggle in her life. She seemed to be plagued by an inferiority problem in every aspect of her life.

The narrative reaches its climax when Cholly commits rape against Pecola. During the novel's falling action, Pecola is subjected to physical abuse by her mother, leading her to doubt her. Pecola then makes a request for blue eyes from Saophead Church, which ultimately leads to her being enraged and resulting in the loss of her baby. Indeed, it is a transformative voyage from naivety to a firsthand encounter with a little African American girl.

Morrison's narrative highlights the stark disparity between the white and black populations in America. To establish a coherent cause-and-effect relationship, the narrative incorporates several techniques such as flashback, flash-forward, backstory, and foreshadowing to organise the chronological progression of events. Toni Morrison employs a

prologue wherein the omniscient narrator employs foreshadowing techniques to introduce the story. The use of flashbacks and cyclical returns to specific events is a prominent literary device employed in the work. The narrative employs flashbacks to portray the formative years of Cholly and Pauline, shedding light on their challenges as individuals belonging to the black community. The narrative commences by recounting the historical events of 1939. The narrator oscillates between various historical events and the present. The majority of the prominent characters, such as Mrs. Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, and Pecola, provide a detailed account of their personal histories sequentially, before presenting the actual events. This observation highlights the contrasting characteristics of the MacTeer family and the Breedlove family. The narrative progresses and culminates with sad occurrences through the use of foreshadowing.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the author engages in a critical examination of the characters, elucidating their internal emotions. She depicts a multitude of characters with varied traits. The author provides detailed descriptions of key individuals such as Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove, while indirectly describing Claudia, to gain insight into their personalities and inner thoughts. The novel exhibits a natural integration of minor characters such as Frieda, Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer, Sam Breedlove, Maureen Peal, Geraldine, Junior, Soaphead Church, and Aunt Jimmy. Certain characters assume the dual function of both a protagonist and a narrator.

The central character, Pecola, is a juvenile African American female who experiences a sense of unease due to her racial identity. Pecola's multifaceted personality renders her a figure of dynamic nature. Despite her inability to alter her physical appearance, she transforms from being innocent to becoming mad. According to the narrator, she consistently wished for blue eyes every night (p.35). She aspires to blue eyes that have the power to transform her and bring about positive transformation in all aspects of her life.

She had a strong preference for the Shirley Temple cup and eagerly drank milk from it whenever possible, solely for the pleasure of touching and observing the charming countenance of Shirley (p. 16).

She aspires to emulate Shirley, who is the quintessential embodiment of ideal beauty during the 20th century. The narrator asserts that the act of consuming "Mary Jane candy" might be likened to consuming the eyes of Mary Jane.

Be Mary Jane. (48)

Ultimately, she approaches Soaphead Church and requests blue eyes. All of Pecola's actions or activities serve as a manifestation of her motif of beauty. In the final chapter, Pecola engages in introspection and holds the belief that she bears a resemblance to an individual with blue eyes. Over time, she cultivates her cognition, yet paradoxically, she falls ill.

Toni Morrison portrays Claudia MacTeer, a young black girl, as an omniscient third-person narrator who assumes the role of the primary narrator throughout the work. She exhibits traits of independence, rebellion, and passion, displaying a level of maturity that is beyond her age. The individual experiences indignation in response to instances of injustice and instinctively perceives a sense of threat from societal norms regarding white beauty. Claudia's statement in the first chapter, "I destroyed white baby dolls" (p.15), demonstrates her strong aversion to white supremacy. In juxtaposition to Pecola, Claudia exhibits resistance towards the notion of white superiority and expresses dissent with the concept of white beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove is a multifaceted figure who is both uneducated and black. Cholly, Pecola's father, exhibits characteristics of carelessness, abuse, and alcoholism. According to the narrator, Cholly was not a responsible spouse and father. Perilously unrestricted. Unrestricted to experience a range of emotions, including fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, and sympathy.

Free to exhibit tenderness or violence, to vocalise or shed tears (p.125).

This suggests that he is liberated from various forms of constraints. The narrator states that the individual in question had become part of the animal kingdom and was, in fact, an elderly dog, a snake, and a ratty nigger (p.12). The use of metaphor by the author serves to depict the character of Cholly. He is irrational, savage, and merciless. The majority of the traumatic experiences in his life, including an abandoned childhood, challenging upbringing, racial inferiority, unhappiness, and loneliness, contribute to the development of his ego and exert an influence on his propensity for violence.

Pauline Breedlove's demeanour and behaviour reflect her absence of maternal qualities. She is characterised as a lady who, following her education in the movies, was unable to perceive a face without categorising it within the realm of pure beauty (p.95). Pauline's imagination constructs a realm in which "white men providing excellent care for the women, and they all adorned themselves in spacious, immaculate residences with the bathtubs conveniently located in the same room as the toilet" (p.95). She cultivates her affection for the white population by adopting a hairstyle

reminiscent of Jean Harlow, immerses herself in the deceptive realm of films, and adopts a contemptuous attitude towards her black community. Her existence lacks the abundance, affection, and magnificence. Her existence is characterised by chaos, disregard, financial instability, disillusionment, subjugation, solitude, and the battle for survival. Pecola's existence exhibits a shared set of beliefs and emotions, leading her to develop a strong longing for blue eyes, ultimately propelling her towards a state of destruction.

The novel is set in Lorain, Ohio, the birthplace and upbringing of Morrison, and chronicles the experiences of the African-American black community in the aftermath of the Great Depression (1929-1939). The duration of the event persisted until the commencement of the Second World War. The novel takes place in 1941, yet it begins with a flashback to 1939. During that period, working-class individuals were employed in coal firms, which resulted in their marginalisation.

The narrative commences with a passage from a primer, a children's instructional series in the United States that was produced between 1930 and 1960. The three renditions of the same sections symbolically represent three distinct lifestyles. This portrayal illustrates the contrasting realities experienced by white children and black children. The novel's structure and grammatical structures serve as a reflection of both reality and irony. The initial rendition employs uncomplicated words and portrays a Caucasian household wherein black youngsters are prohibited from participating. It signifies a meticulously structured and contented family comprising a father and mother.

"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. ... Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, Play" (p.01).

The second iteration of the text exhibits the absence of capitalization, a narrow spacing between words, and the absence of punctuation, which serves as a symbolic representation of the MacTeer family.

"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- the white house they are very happy to 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 ... here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play"(p.01).

The third version, devoid of capitalization, punctuation, and space between words, represents the dysfunctional, disorderly, and anarchic nature of the Breedlove family. The familial tie is likewise flawed. They endure destitution, confronting subjugation and prejudice. This version provides an overview of the overall state of the black family.

"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. How will [she] play with Jane? See the cat. It goes, 'meow, meow.' Come and play, come, come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, mother, laugh. See father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, father, smiles. 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." (p 2)

"Autumn" acquaints the reader with two families, namely the MacTeer family and the Breedlove family. Claudia, the first-person narrator in "Winter," effectively portrays the pervasive bigotry among the African-American community through her own words. The longest segment, titled "Spring," serves two distinct functions. The first image depicts the harsh climate, whereas the second image portrays the surroundings that contribute to this atmosphere. The brief segment titled "Summer" elucidates the events that transpire in the preceding parts. The characters in *The Bluest Eye* are influenced by the change of seasons. Their lives follow a cyclical pattern akin to seasons. The seasonal elements serve as a representation of Pecola's sorrowful existence. The transition of seasons signifies the alteration of occurrences.

The events in the narrative take place in many locations. Significant occurrences take place in the MacTeer home, which is described as "ancient, frigid, and verdant" (5). The historical occurrences in Pecola's life take place within the confines of Breedlove's house, where the furnishings are largely unremarkable. Additional occurrences occur in various locations such as the street, school, Geraldine's residence, and Soaphead Church. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison occasionally employs italicised lines or dialogues. Pecola beseeches, "Exquisite eyes. *Delicious blue eyes*" (34).

Pecola conveys her inward need through the use of italicised words. The use of the italic form is employed to depict the fantastical realm of Pauline Breedlove. Her passion for films constitutes her entire existence.

The protagonist envisions her association with Cholly via a cinematic lens, while the actuality diverges, characterised by aggression and cruelty. In the final chapter, Pecola's italicised conversation with her imaginary buddy,

The Bluest Eyes is mentioned. Will you return at that time? / Indeed, I will.

I will simply depart for a brief period (p.162).

In reality, she engages in self-talk, conversing with her fictional persona.

The tone of *The Bluest Eye* exhibits a predominantly pessimistic, bitter, occasionally empathetic, and philosophical disposition. Morrison employs an atmosphere that might be characterised as melancholic and melancholy, effectively conveying the essence of the events unfolding in the lives of the protagonists. The author employs a recurring refrain of using terms such as 'ugly', 'irritating', 'melancholy', 'poor', 'darkly', and others that possess a negative meaning.

The author employs Black colloquial English as a means of communication to juxtapose and differentiate between individuals of white and black ethnicities. This analysis juxtaposes two communities in the United States to illustrate the cultural and identity aspects of the black community. Morrison's use of language serves as a representation of the divergence present within the African-American conversation. In addition, the author employs other literary devices, including similes, metaphors, imageries, symbolism, irony, paradox, allusion, and stream of consciousness, among others.

Morrison employs a retroactive storytelling technique. The story is presented by multiple narrators. In the prologue of the work, the omniscient narrator assumes a presence within Claudia's psyche. The author immerses the readers in Pecola's cognitive processes. The novel exhibits a recurring pattern of narrator changes. Claudia MacTeer serves as the primary narrator.

Occasionally, she serves as a character in her narration, as exemplified by the line,

I contemplate autumn, I contemplate someone with hands who desires my survival. (p.07).

Occasionally, the author assumes the role of an omniscient narrator, recounting the experiences of several characters including Pecola, Cholly, Pauline, Freida, and others. Claudia provides narratives of both historical and contemporary events from various perspectives. Toni Morrison employs a variety of narrative perspectives, changing between the first-person and third-person narrators, a technique referred to as 'polyphonic' narrative by Mankhia and Alhousseini (2020).

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison employs several narrative approaches to generate unique and deliberate effects within the narrative of *The Bluest Eye*. The conventional structure of storytelling has been manipulated to align with her objectives. Toni Morrison portrays the racism and oppression of black individuals in the Afro-American culture, as well as the psychological and social effects on the protagonists, in her narrative *The Bluest Eye*. She portrays her journey using skilfully crafted narrative tactics. The novel possesses a distinct edge in presenting the scenario because it utilised Black colloquial speech, retrospective narrative twisting punctuation, and unconventional literary mechanics. These elements collectively influence the process of characterization. Consequently, the characters' vocabulary and speech grow more vibrant, reflecting their unique personalities and the overall mannerisms of the people in the setting. Rather than imposing the novelist's perspective on the characters, the characters are given the freedom to express themselves, resulting in a narrative that is characterised by multiple voices. Furthermore, the inclusion of section-wise chapters, a well-defined environment, and the implementation of specific stylistic techniques have enhanced the realism, intrigue, and authenticity of the plot. The story referred to as 'polyphonic' has received support from the standpoint of multi-voiced, which encompasses several distinctive lexical, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic stylistic elements.

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