

# TWO DARK VIEWS OF AMERICA

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*Abstract:* This essay reflects upon two novels written by African-American women after the 1960s, (*The color purple*, by Alice Walker, and *The bluest eye*, by Toni Morrison) and analyzes the different ways in which they deal with the representation of these minorities and denounce the failure of the American Dream.

*Keyword:* Contemporary literature; American literature; African-American literature.

■ **D**uring and after the 1960s, the voice of African Americans started to appear in the United States, and some novels were written to express this minority group. *The color purple* (Alice Walker, 1982) and *The bluest eye* (Toni Morrison, 1970) are novels which specifically describe the life of poor black women in the segregational America of the early 1900s, showing that the American dream was far from being a reality to them. These novels, however, have different approaches to the topic, both thematically and formally speaking. We shall analyze, hence, some aspects present in their plot and structure in order to understand what are the values transmitted through each of them.

In *The bluest eye*, the plot happens in a black neighborhood in the 1930s and 1940s, and the narrator is very specific: the story starts in 1939. At the same time, however, the reader is exposed to chapters divided into seasons. Therefore, the time is seen as something both chronological and cyclical. These seasons refer to changes in the plot, and the spring was awaited with a lot of enthusiasm by the characters.

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We may think that the use of cyclical time represents an idea that there are no changes, that there is an endless power coming from nature that controls the destiny of the characters. However, when we see that in one summer there was a tornado, and that the spring did not bring good things as they had expected (Pecola was raped), we can conclude that this concept of time is being relativized, if not satirized. Also, there are some flashforwards and flashbacks to refer to some events.

*The color purple*, on the other hand, does not refer to exact dates, and the passage of time is difficult to be observed, which gives a notion of atemporality. We can only see time passing because of the remote references to the ages of some characters. There are a few flashbacks, but within the limit of the letters.

These letters impose not only the limit of time, but also the limit of point of view. Being an epistolary novel, *The color purple* is presented through the voice of Celie, and later on, also through the voice of her sister Nettie. The first letters are written to God, since she is powerless and does not have anyone to talk to, but afterwards she starts writing to her sister. By letting Celie and Nettie narrate the story, Alice Walker gives voice to a group that is ignored by mainstream culture, and by writing with an oral Black English variety, she gives verisimilitude to the story.

*The bluest eye* has a much more complex point of view, for we can see the voice of Claudia as a child (innocent, but already questioning some common senses) and as an adult (reflexive and mature). This can be perceived through the use of verbs, alternating between past and present, and the vocabulary. Also, when the perspective is of Claudia as a child, there is a concrete and sensorial language, and when it refers to Claudia as an adult, there is a more abstract and analytical one. In a few moments Pauline (Pecola's mother) is given voice too, when the reader has access to her diary.

In this novel, there is also an omniscient narrator that tells the story of the Breedlove (Pecola's family) with a certain epic distance. This shift involving different voices enables the reader to have an emotional identification in some moments and in others to reflect and think critically upon what is being exposed.

The epic distance is also achieved by the use of the extracts of a storybook in the beginning of the novel, and the repetition of them throughout the novel, as headings of the different sections. These extracts refer thematically to the section which they open, but in an ironic way. The contrast between the representation of an ideal middle-class family and the reality of Pecola creates an effect of estrangement (*Verfremdung*) that forces the reader to reflect upon the concept of the American dream and how far it is really true.

Toni Morrison, in the Afterword written in 1993, explains why she decided to use multiple narrators in the novel:

*One problem was centering: the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution – break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader (MORRISON, 1992, p. 211).*

Her objective, hence, is to have an active reader who has to make connections among the fragmented perspectives in order to see the whole. The usage

of multiple narrators (or of letters, in the case of *The color purple*) as a form of narrative is interesting because it shows that the traditional omniscient narrator is not suitable for this historical moment. Adorno (1991, p. 55) refers to the position of the narrator in contemporary novels as a paradox: “[...] it is no longer possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration. The novel was the specific literary form of the bourgeois era”. Moreover, in the case of those two novels, as they tell a non-hegemonic story, they have to invent a new way to narrate it.

Using Claudia as a narrator most of the time, Morrison’s novel gains a lot of complexity, since the reader sees this character going through a process of maturation. As a child, she is an innocent girl who believes in supernatural things and miracles, but as an adult, she has learned a lot and can even reflect critically upon her past experiences. We do not see this movement from innocence to experience in Pecola, who has the “binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her” (MORRISON, 1992, p. 46), and, at the end of the novel, becomes schizophrenic.

In *The color purple*, Celie and Nettie also undergo a process of maturation, but in a much more limited degree. Celie’s letters, for instance, begin with a childish view of the world, and move to more complex attempts to understand and analyze her reality. Also, in the beginning, she accepted passively her reality: “I don’t say nothing: I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away, what good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (WALKER, 1985, p. 22). After some years, she learns that she can fight for her rights, and stops accepting everything that is imposed on her.

Nettie gains experience when she travels as a missionary to Africa and realizes little by little the reality about colonization. At first, she is influenced by “[...] all the good things they could do for the downtrodden people from whom they sprang. People who need Christ and good medical advice” (WALKER, 1985, p. 137), but when she starts studying about African history she says: “I hadn’t realized I was so ignorant, Celie” (WALKER, 1985, p. 138).

After that, her letters show a much more conscious attitude, at least regarding the past:

*Although Africans once had a better civilization than the European [...] for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. “Hard times” is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa’s “hard times” were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars* (WALKER, 1985, p. 145).

In the following letters, Nettie becomes even more aware of reality, because Olinka (the African community where she lives) was destroyed, and the territory “now belongs to a rubber manufacturer in England” (WALKER, 1985, p. 175). There are even some implicit references to globalization and capital subsun- tion: “Since the Olinka no longer own their village, they must pay rent for it, and in order to use the water, which also no longer belongs to them, they must pay a water tax” (WALKER, 1985, p. 176). These moments of epiphany, however, do not get to the root of the problem, which is capitalism itself. There is a criticism in Nettie’s letters, but it is only related to colonialism, not making any connections between it and the economic system.

In *The bluest eye*, the fact that we have Claudia, a much more complex character, together with the epic distance provided by the omniscient narrator, enables us to have deeper insights into the real problem. In the beginning of the novel, grown-up Claudia says:

*It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. Once we knew, our guilt was relieved only by fights and mutual accusations about who was to blame. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth, It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding (MORRISON, 1992, p. 5).*

The reader sees here an attempt to have a totalizing view of the problem, and the image of the unyielding earth represents nothing more than the capitalist system. In *The color purple*, Celie, the protagonist, has a sexual and individual evolution; Nettie has a more cognitive one, but not in the same level Claudia has, since only the latter realizes the problem is systemic.

The cognitive development of two characters from *The color purple* is also limited by their religion. In the beginning of the novel, Celie talks to God because it was the only option she had. After some letters, she becomes revolted with God, and says to Nettie: "I don't write to God no more. I write to you. [...] If he ever listened to poor colored women the world would be a different place, I can tell you" (WALKER, 1985, p. 199-200).

However, her following dialogue with Shug convinces her that God is a nice being, and she converts to a more existentialist religion, similar to pantheism. Celie, then, continues to believe and talk to God. Her last letter is addressed to "Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God" (WALKER, 1985, p. 292), and followed by the sentence "Thank you for bringing my sister Nettie and our children home" (WALKER, 1985, p. 292). Therefore, she keeps on believing that her destiny is controlled by the will of an external force, and not by the economic system.

Although Nettie does not mention God very frequently in her letters, we can claim that she shares the same thought of her sister, for when she finds Celie's children she says: "'God' has sent me to watch over them, to protect and cherish them. To lavish all the love I feel for you on them. It is a miracle, isn't it?" (WALKER, 1985, p. 139).

The very plot of *The color purple* is solved in terms of fate in some moments. The fact that Nettie finds Celie's children, for instance, can only be perceived in terms of "a miracle", without any further explanation. And what can we say about Celie, who by the end of the novel has become an independent wealthy woman, after she suddenly discovers she has inherited a house and a goods store from her stepfather?

Before she discovers about the house, she goes to visit her stepfather, and there is a description of the scenery that is important to be observed:

*Well, it was a bright Spring day [...] and the first thing us notice soon as we turn into the lane is how green everything is, like even though the ground everywhere else not warmed up good, Pa's land is warm and ready to go. Then all along the road there's Easter lilies and jonquils and daffodils and all kinds of little early wildflowers (WALKER, 1985, p. 184-185).*

This description of the flowers and greenish scenery is particularly interesting when contrasted with the “marigolds” of *The bluest eye*, which do not bloom anywhere in the country:

A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year (MORRISON, 1992 p. 5).

What happens to Celie, then, is obviously a happy ending which is celebrated by her in the last sentence of the novel: “And so us happy, Matter of fact, I think this is the youngest us ever felt. Amen” (WALKER, 1985, p. 295). We cannot find the same ending in *The bluest eye*: even though Pecola gets the blue eyes, she only achieves her dream through madness. Furthermore, since the beginning of the novel the reader is aware that Pecola’s story will end in a terrible way, so there is no reason to expect something from the plot itself.

Bearing in mind the plot resolution, we may state that *The color purple* defends the idea of identity politics, being in favor of women and black, the minorities it tries to give voice to. The climax of the plot is when Celie decides to say everything she has always wanted to, and goes away with Shug to live on their own. She decides to wear pants and to start her own business; i. e., all she wants is to fit the system, and not to change it.

Thus it is a feminist novel, more than anything. In Nettie’s words, the message of the novel is: “The world is changing, I said. It is no longer a world just for boys and men” (WALKER, 1985, p. 167). It is a story of women celebrating their economic independence, their space in the market.

*The bluest eye*, on the other hand, is not a novel about racism or feminism; as Claudia claims, “[...] all the time we knew that Maureen Peal [a white girl who lives in their neighborhood] was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful and not us” (MORRISON, 1985, p. 74).

Its objective, hence, is far from defending the inclusion of black people in the system, for Morrison knows that they would only change from alienation (e. g. Pecola) to reification (e. g. Shirley Temple); but, rather, to understand the mechanisms that created the conditions for that ideology.

These two novels were written in decades that discussed the inclusion of minorities (blacks, homosexuals, women etc) in the cultural movements. They were concerned with the lack of these groups in powerful social positions, having no role models representing them in the media. Having this in mind, people started to believe that the solution to the oppression of minorities was exposing them to others, using their images to extinguish the prejudice against them.

As Naomi Klein (2000) discusses, observing that a new generation was trying to solve the stereotype issues by simply representing them in the media, the marketers were able to find a new way to sell their products. So, instead of being worried about this new movement of unifying cultures, the media thought it was profitable, interesting for their needs. In order to catch the audience’s interest, which was showing diversity, the marketers, media makers and pop-culture producers shifted their attitudes towards this direction.

The Civil Rights, then, was transformed into the slogan “Black is beautiful”, and the market profited a lot with it. After that, “the black mothers from the 60s could buy their daughters Barbie’s black equivalent: Christie”

(WILLIS, 1991, p. 140). As Klein (2000, p.113) implies, “[...] identity politics weren’t fighting the system, or even subverting it. When it came to the vast new industry of corporate branding, they were feeding it”. Therefore, according to Klein, identity politics is not the solution, because it is deeply connected to the market.

However, the contradictions of the system reflect on the novels, whether consciously perceived or not by the authors. In *The color purple*, for instance, Sofia is the character that clearly shows those contradictions: she represents the voice of feminism, because she is the woman who does not accept orders and dominance (neither from men, nor from white people). But the novel does not completely romanticize her attitude, showing the side effects of it in a repressive society: she is arrested because she refuses to work as a maid to a white woman, and when she leaves prison she ends up working (almost as a slave) for this same woman. This happens because, as Fredric Jameson (1992) theorizes, there is a contradiction between what culture and ideology try to solve and the very nature of social conflicts.

Because of these contradictions, according to Jameson, everything that is ideological has to be at the same time a little utopian too. This hope can be seen in *The color purple* when the “implied author” imagines a cooperative industry where Celie “organizes the collective production of pants to her community of friends and relatives” (WILLIS, 1991, p.153). This is a way to go against the fetishism of commodity and imagine an alternative way of economic production.

If art is a construction of meanings and values, what the author thinks of reality is inscribed in the way he writes the novel. *The bluest eye*, then, does not let the questions of race and genre cover the fact that the problem is systemic. This idea is emphasized once more in the novel through the images of earth and flowers, when Claudia concludes:

*I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers* (MORRISON, 1992, p. 206).

*The color purple*, despite focusing on the question of genre, and sometimes race, at certain moments, consciously or not, shows that there is something deeper in question. Nettie is the character that most approximates it when she says: “There is so much we don’t understand. And so much unhappiness comes because of that” (WALKER, 1985, p. 198); and “None of this has to do with color” (WALKER, 1985, p. 265).

Surely, these novels could only have been written because of the Civil Rights, in the ‘60s, who gave the possibility for the authors to give voice to minorities. Morrison, even though writing before Walker, went further and saw the limits of this project. She was able to see that the movement that said “Black is beautiful” was being colonized by the market, concluding that it was, in Claudia’s words, “adjustment without improvement” (MORRISON, 1992, p. 23).

In conclusion, these two novels aimed at the invention of a new America through Art, but they both (one more than the other) ended up showing by some formal and thematic contradictions the failure of this project in their society.

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**Resumo:** *Este ensaio propõe uma reflexão sobre dois romances escritos por mulheres afro-americanas após os anos 1960 (The color purple, de Alice Walker, e The bluest eye, de Toni Morrison), e analisa as diferentes maneiras com as quais elas lidam com a representação dessas minorias e denunciam o fracasso do "sonho americano".*

**Palavras-chave:** *Literatura contemporânea; literatura norte-americana; literatura afro-americana.*