

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: First Things First

So much wonderful work has been written about Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) within the north American context of white beauty's supremacy, the black family, the Black Power Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and Black girlhood studies. Rather than rehearse those fine analyses here, I want to talk about what the recurring theme of planted seeds in Morrison's first novel might suggest first novels are essentially good for. Besides referencing how the main protagonist came to be impregnated, recurring seed-planting language suggests that first novels might be good for meditations on foundational things such as laying groundwork; literacy primers; a person's place of birth; where, how, and by whom you were raised; structural racism; the history behind your current social and political status; and even literal foundations like the very soil that we rely on for our food.

As an educator, I believe in the power of analogies to effect eureka moments and epiphanies. Sometimes you have to understand what a thing is like or might be like before you can actually understand the thing itself. ("Tell all the truth but tell it slant – / Success in Circuit lies [...]") These lines from [an Emily Dickinson poem](#) confirm my point, for example. Indeed, we can typically count on works of literature, with their vivid metaphors, to provide us analogies for social concepts that might otherwise be difficult to understand. Literature is like a thesaurus of real life, giving us relatable and alternative language to make sense of it.

One such difficult but omnipresent concept, these days, is the so-called "institutional," "systemic," or "structural" nature of social problems such as inequality and racism. While these terms are certainly accurate descriptors, they are not all that visualizable. Thankfully,

the generosity of Toni Morrison's exquisite gift in the art of language composition has always given her readers a variety of ways, routes and turns of phrase to understand the world, so perhaps it's no surprise that she has rendered something like structural racism comprehensible. Because *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates how the complex system of racism—coupled with oppressive dictates of a white beauty standard—pelts down on little Black girls in particular, thereby stunting their growth and mentally impairing them, the novel makes that system at once detectable, nameable, and palpable. Of this so-called fact of white beauty and (as a corollary) the fact of Black ugliness, [Tressie McMillan Cottom](#) writes: “They say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and that ugly is as ugly does. Both are lies. Ugly is everything done to you in the name of beauty.” To help us identify such ugly impacts and ugly forces, *The Bluest Eye* points to how racism is everywhere built into our environment. It's in the very air we breathe, the very ground we tread, and even implicated in the passage of time. It is embedded in the bedrock on which our social institutions lay their very foundations.

According to the [Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change](#) (2004), structural racism is:

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with “whiteness” and disadvantages associated with “color” to endure and adapt over time.

To make a complicated concept like this make sense requires at least one example of it, and the one that Morrison proffers from the very beginning of the novel is the bad soil of an “unyielding” earth.

Even as a black girl growing up in the decidedly urban environment of 1980s Brooklyn, New York, I was exposed to the basics of soil science in school. Morrison knows that soil language belongs as much to children who are learning to plant seeds for the first time as it does to veteran soil scientists. In a novel whose pages immediately bring us simultaneously into the elementary school classroom and into a family’s house via the Dick-and-Jane primer, Morrison wants us to consider the various and often typical places that our basic foundations of knowledge and self-awareness come from. And besides home and school, what place could possibly be more foundational than the very ground beneath our feet? I dare say soil is the structure of all structures, after all.

If in the beginning of the novel, Claudia, the young narrator, blames herself for why no marigolds bloomed that year (“For years I thought [...] it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth.”), then by the novel’s end, she is not only older but also wiser:

“And now [...] 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 that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear [...].”

To wise up is to stop blaming oneself, the victim, and one another for floral inequality or anti-marigold floral discrimination. To wise up is to start pointing fingers at the real culprit

instead: a system, which in this case is represented by the literal bedrock of our existence. To wise up is finally to be able to fathom the possibility that the vexing problem of our lives lies in something a finger can't really just point at, because the problem is neither a person nor a discrete entity with clearly discernable contours. In a carefully crafted Whodunit, in which the characters get a chance to narrate their side of the story, Morrison ultimately makes a convincing case against an unlikely culprit: the soil—a system and a structure “hostile to marigolds.”

In *Sula*, the novel Morrison publishes after *The Bluest Eye*, she again points to soil as a graspable metaphor for structural racism. According to the legend of “the Bottom”—the part of town where Black people lived—a white farmer conned a Black person into accepting “hilly land, where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter.” The very land itself is hostile to the possibility of Black people thriving on it. Morrison helps us to visualize what it means to locate racism's workings in a structure—soil structure in this particular case, but a visible and tangible foundation that results in Black people being disadvantaged nevertheless. While Black people are burdened and even slighted by soil, white people not only live on the fertile “rich valley floor,” but by the novel's end they also move into and gentrify the Bottom where “White people were building towers for television stations” and possibly a golf course too. As much as this system disproportionately benefits White people it also disproportionately disadvantages Black people—and all at the same time each and every different time.

On various occasions, Toni Morrison has discussed the origins of her idea for *The Bluest Eye*. When she was in elementary school, a fellow black girl classmate told her that she wanted blue eyes. Morrison read that desire as a self-loathing and wanted, as a consequence, to understand “the workings of self-loathing.” What *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates is that those workings actually begin from a place entirely external to the self and often unbeknownst to us. One does not self-loathe spontaneously or in a vacuum. How (and for whom) a society is structured creates the circumstances that enable either self-loathing or self-regard. One’s self-loathing or self-regard is prompted and sustained by a society already steeped in loathing or love for you and your kind, respectively. *The Bluest Eye* teaches us how to (and that we can!) point fingers at systems and not people, even when we don’t know how to challenge or change that system. Something is rotten in and *about* the soil.

When you can diagnose a tenacious social problem as originating in the very soil of that society itself and if that diagnosis triggers memories of even just rudimentary lessons about the soil science that you learned in elementary school, then you know that you have the intellectual wherewithal at least to begin asking the right questions toward possibly solving that problem: How do we find fresh soil, and how should we change nutrient-poor soil so that it is life-giving and nutritious for all flowers? How often should we change the soil to keep it conducive to all of its flowers’ flourishing? How could we have ever possibly blamed any of this on the flowers, for cryin’ out loud? How do we gather enough people to do this hard but necessary work? Lo and behold, we’ve been knowing how to do things with and ask things of foundations and substructures since elementary school. Lest we forget our early-cultivated and foundational forms of knowledge, Morrison reminds us that asking questions about systems, substructures, groundwork, and soil is something that we’ve done before

even as children; asking those questions can be like riding a bike, even if actually addressing the problem is not. She asks us to trust that we know *something* about social structures, instead of defaulting to claiming we know nothing at all. (For some answers to the questions I've posed here, please see Leah Penniman's deeply informative and inspiring book [Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land](#). The chapter titled "Restoring Degraded Land," begins with a relevant Ghanaian proverb that pairs so perfectly with *The Bluest Eye*: "If the yam does not grow well, do not blame the yam. It is because of the soil.")

As yet another example of how our external factors inform and structure our lives, Morrison divides the novel into discrete sections corresponding to the four seasons. But I would argue that the fiftieth-year anniversary celebration of *The Bluest Eye* in the Age of Climate Change is a reminder to us all that something so presumably unwieldy and beyond our mere mortal control as time's passage (as weather conditions) is, in fact, very much within our power to transform. Because if the scientific consensus is that climate change is mostly man made, then it turns out that human activity does have the capacity to *restructure* anew. It's up to us to redirect the earth's course toward our collective thriving instead of dying. And we can do that, as [Christina Sharpe](#) suggests, if we continue—as Black enslaved people did before us—to "produce [our] own ecologies of the weather."

And there are at least two ways to read that rallying cry: To be *out* of the weather is effectively to be out of this world. And what a fantastic and imaginative-rich vantage point that could be! (It's certainly better than being *under* the weather, for example.) To make something out of *the weather* is to assume a power you might not even know you had—the

power to revise, control, and influence it. Or, as Morrison reminds us via the story she tells in [her 1993 Nobel Prize acceptance speech](#): “it is in your hands.” Whether it’s working the soil or working the weather, Morrison knows that freedom from anti-black soil and weather will require a lot of hands, will take a lot of manual labor. Let’s get to work!

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