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Hons. 181, ex. 14

In her afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison discusses her “struggle” to find a language “that was indisputably black” (211). She employs a variety of approaches in search of this idiom—varying the novel’s narrative techniques, employing black colloquialisms, and telling much of the story through first-person voices. Morrison’s task, however, ultimately defeats her. The novel has great success in almost all its ambitions, but it never reaches “a language worthy of the culture” embedded in it (216). Morrison realizes this shortcoming, which is why her afterword focuses so closely on the novel’s idiom. She points out many of her own weaknesses, correctly identifying “the section on Pauline Breedlove” as the most linguistically unsuccessful (215). Her preoccupation suggests that the specter of a proper black idiom haunts her even two decades after the book’s publication. Readers should be sympathetic, though, for this problem has no complete solution. Morrison’s linguistic difficulties underscore an incommensurability between the particular kind of “complexity and wealth” typical to “black-American culture” and the tradition of literary expression of which Morrison is a part (216).

This incommensurability manifests itself in linguistic tensions throughout *The Bluest Eye*. Parts of the book appear in the colloquial gossip of black women, a chorus introduced early in the first chapter (12-15). Other passages, however, approach the language of academia. One sentence that opens a paragraph in the description of the Breedloves’ house illustrates this tension. “So fluid has the population in that area been,” writes Morrison, “that probably no one remembers longer, longer ago, before the time of the gypsies and the time of the teen-agers when the Breedloves lived there, nestled together in the storefront” (34). The first nine words of the sentence recall the language of sociology textbooks, but after the comma the sentence gradually slips into a colloquial poetry. Such shifts appear often, and the book’s structure as a whole magnifies this tension more broadly in the contrast between the voices of Claudia, the narrator, Pauline, and Pecola, as well as those of the quoted characters.

These examples illustrate Morrison’s challenge: to represent one culture in the language of another without violating the truth of the culture represented. English, and more specifically the brand of English capable of expressing the complexity her themes require, is a burdened language for African Americans. Slaves first learned English so they could understand the commands of their masters. Morrison learned English in a segregated school whose curriculum was calculated to preserve the power structure that subjected blacks. High English, academic English, gains its prestige by excluding other idioms, especially the colloquial idiom of African Americans. Yet in numerous episodes of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison finds herself forced to use the exalted language her education has taught her. The complexity of her characters and their situations exceeds the expressive capacities of black colloquialism reproduced through writing. This tension does not indicate that her characters are unrealistic, that real black people do not have such complexity, it bespeaks a difference between the variety of their expression and the linear focus of written language. The language through which the prototypes of her characters express themselves, both to others and to themselves, is situated not so much in the meanings of words as in the symphony of speech, memory, and emotions. Morrison thus aptly expresses her challenge when she writes that one of her characters “could become coherent only in the mind of a musician” (159).

The result of Morrison’s search for a proper idiom is a pained chorus of voices in clumsy harmony. She fails to represent “the complexity and wealth of Black-American culture” (216).

She succeeds immensely, however, in a task she does not mention. The jaggedness of her narrative captures perfectly the tension between two idioms, a tension only peripheral to her stated goal but relevant to the black experience. The cacophony of her narrative voices rings from the clash within her, perhaps too personal for her to recognize, between the traditions of her education and the traditions of her ancestors.