

FOLK TRADITIONS IN TONI MORRISON'S

THE BLUEST EYE

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, SPEECH, AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

BY

GLENDAY KAY HODGES PICHAY, BA

DENTON, TEXAS

MAY 1993

TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Copyright c Glenda Picha , 1993

All rights reserved

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

To the memory of my mother, Helen Hardin Hodges

Without her encouragement to continue my education, I never would have taken the first step. Without her determination for me to persevere, I never would have taken the final step. Although her life did not extend long enough for her to see the completion of my degree, my mother is smiling proudly and is telling everyone in Heaven who will listen what her daughter has accomplished!

FOLK TRADITIONS IN TONI MORRISON'S

THE BLUEST EYE

Glenda Kay Hodges Picha

May 1993

"Folk Traditions in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye" investigates the use of folk traditions employed unconsciously by the characters in the novel during their daily lives. Beginning by forming a usable definition of folklore, the thesis investigates folk traditions in the areas of the family, religion, songs, music, medicine, and death. Discussed in the novel are examples of these traditions as they are lived by the characters.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. FAMILY TRADITIONS	5
III. RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS	24
IV. FOLK SONG AND FOLK MUSIC	35
V. MEDICAL PRACTICES AND DEATH RITUALS	53
VI. CONCLUSION	73
WORKS CONSULTED	75

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Prerequisite to a study of folk traditions in Toni Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye is the need to investigate the definitions of folklore or folk tradition and to establish a foundation for this study. Funk and Wagnall's Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend includes many definitions. These definitions range from restricted interpretations to unrestricted explications. An example of a restricted definition is given by George Herzog:

Folklore in the specific sense, which is the usual one of the United States, embraces those literary and intellectual phases of culture which are perpetuated primarily by oral tradition: myths, tales, folk song, and other forms of oral traditional literature; folk speech and dialect as the medium of these materials; folk music and folk dancing because of their intimate relation to folk song; also custom, beliefs, and folk science.

(Leach 400)

Although this definition appears rather broad in scope, it places boundaries upon what is included and what is not

included in the realm of folklore. George M. Foster also gives a rather broad definition: "A survey of materials published as folklore indicates that the subject is pretty much what one wants to make of it" (Leach 300).

Franz Boas and Harold Courlander provide definitions of folklore which blend Herzog and Foster's definitions. Franz Boas' definition of folklore includes the idea that elements of folklore are passed from generation to generation by "transmission." These elements are internalized through repetition until they become traditional, or a matter of habit. The idea that Mr. Boas presents is intriguing because he believes that folk traditions are not consciously taught by one generation to another, but each generation through repetition of traditions cements the history of the family or group. Mr. Boas' definition and application of his idea to the traditions of the Black race encompass new boundaries. Each race is unique in its accumulation of folklore. However, there is a need for caution in studying Black traditions:

We need to caution ourselves now and again at this particular time in our social development when so much stress is given to **black** literature, **black** traditions and **black** ideas, that oral literature and customs are products of environment,

history and culture, and not of race.

(Courlander 6)

Combining Mr. Boas' definition with Mr. Courlander's caution, a workable definition for this study of Black folk tradition is formed: The elements of environment, history, and culture are transmitted from one generation to another until the traditions become so internalized that participants are not aware that their lives are deeply affected by folk traditions.

In Morrison's The Bluest Eye published in 1970, the Black characters have internalized their history and unconsciously repeated their folk traditions in their daily activities. This internalization of tradition makes The Bluest Eye "The story of Afro-American folk culture in process" (Harris 68). Harris further states:

From folk wisdom to the blues, from folk speech to myths and other beliefs, Lorain, Ohio, shares with historical black folk communities patterns of survival and coping, traditions that comfort in times of loss, and beliefs that point to an enduring creativity.

(Harris 68)

Toni Morrison was aware of these patterns when she wrote

The Bluest Eye, and she called this internalized tradition rememory. Rushdy observes: "A primal scene is, then, an opportunity and affective agency for self-discovery through memory and through what Morrison felicitously calls rememory" (Rushdy 303). Through the events in the novel, Morrison takes her characters through various daily events in which they unconsciously recreate folk traditions set down in their memories. She leads them through various events which record folk traditions of Black people arising from their environment, history, and culture. In the novel, narrator Claudia MacTeer realizes if only for an instant that rememory plays an important role in her life: "We remembered . . . We remembered . . . Or maybe we didn't remember; we just knew" (Morrison 148-49).

The internalization of folk elements in the daily lives of the characters in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye provides an encyclopedia of various folk traditions. From the good times to the bad times, her characters unknowingly rely upon the folk traditions in their rememory. These folk traditions include ones associated with the family unit, religion, songs, music, medicine, and death.

CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY TRADITIONS

In The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison presents positive and negative examples of family traditions. These positive and negative traditions exist because of the characters' environment, history, and culture. In the novel, characters imitate the actions of their ancestors. The novel's characters never question or think whether their ancestors' actions were right or wrong. These characters have internalized what they have experienced so that their actions perpetuate the traditions already begun in their families, or their rememory of family traditions guides them in continuing these traditions. Considering whether their actions are right or wrong is unimportant when characters mimic what their environment has produced for generations.

The family patterns presented by Toni Morrison include functional and dysfunctional family units of Black folk culture. These patterns of family units are pivotal to the development of the novel's plot. For example, the MacTeer family is a functional unit. This family consists of a mother and father who tend to the needs of their daughters, Claudia and Frieda. The MacTeer family remains a cohesive unit even when problems arise. The Breedlove family, on the other hand, is a dysfunctional unit. Cholly Breedlove was

abandoned by his mother when he was an infant. His first family experience is with a dysfunctional unit. As a child, Cholly is abandoned by his mother and his father. He is reared by his Aunt Jimmy. Cholly is in school before Aunt Jimmy tells him his father's name. Therefore, Cholly has no positive role model as a pattern for his family. Cholly and his wife Pauline argue so much that their children, Sammy and Pecola, classify the days of their lives by the memorable quarrels between their mother and father. The effect of not having a functional family as a child manifests itself in the adult Cholly. After one afternoon of drinking, Cholly enters his kitchen and rapes Pecola, his young daughter. Morrison uses the contrasting family units of the MacTeers and Breedloves to convey Black family folk culture to the reader.

Caring for a sick child is one of the first examples of family folk practice Morrison includes in the plot of The Bluest Eye. Claudia MacTeer, the narrator of the novel, is a ten-year-old girl and a member of the functional family. As Claudia recalls her childhood, she remembers being ill at an early age. She remembers her mother's anger at her for this illness, but she also remembers the love that flowed through her mother's hands as she nursed her sick child:

Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup,
eased up into that cracked window. I

could smell it--taste it--sweet, musty,
with an edge of wintergreen in its base--
everywhere in the house. It stuck, along
with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes.
It coated my chest, along with the salve,
and when the flannel came undone in my sleep,
the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its
presence on my throat. And in the night, when
my coughing was dry and tough, feet padded
into the room, hands repinned the flannel,
readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment
on my forehead. So when I think of autumn,
I think of somebody with hands who does not
want me to die. (Morrison 14)

A second example also involves Claudia and her
perception of how seasons change and how her parents'
methods of punishment change for their children. The critic
Edelberg comments on this habit:

In The Bluest Eye, the ten-year-old
Claudia, for whom the coming of
spring means a change in whipping
styles, speaks to her bare hope:
They beat us differently in the
spring. Instead of the dull pain of
the winter strap, there were these

new green switches. (Edelberg 218)

A functional but strict family places restrictions upon children. When a child disobeys, punishment is administered. Claudia's memory of the punishment changing with the seasons is a family folk recollection.

A third example of family tradition also involves Claudia MacTeer. At Christmas, the traditional giving of a doll to young girls is observed by Claudia's family. However, Claudia has no interest in receiving the traditional gift of a blue-eyed baby doll. In fact, the doll revolts her: "I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair" (Morrison 20). Claudia never finds the same comfort in the doll as her family does. She realizes that everyone looks upon the image which the doll represents as being the peak of perfection: " . . . all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (Morrison 20). In spite of Claudia's young age, she hopes for events that might begin a new tradition. Claudia wishes someone would ask her what she wants for Christmas. Her answer definitely is not a blue-eyed baby doll. Her reply would be: "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone" (Morrison 21). Claudia

unconsciously realizes that events stored in her memory and brought to the surface by her rememory need to be altered to satisfy her own special desires.

Even in a functional family, events may occur which are not positive examples for children to follow. Claudia encounters this negative conflict in her family. Pecola Breedlove lives with the MacTeer family, and the MacTeers pay for Pecola's food. Claudia's mother becomes unsettled with the situation of having another mouth to feed and in her anger speaks of traditions which are a creation of environment and history:

Folks just dump they children off on
you and go on 'bout they business.
Ain't nobody even **peeped** in here to
see whether that child has a loaf of
bread. Look like they would just **peep**
in to see whether I had a loaf of
bread to give her. But naw. That
thought don't cross they mind. That
old trifling Cholly been out of jail
two whole days and ain't been here
yet to see if his own child was 'live
or dead. She could be **dead** for all he
know. And that **mama** neither. What
kind of something is that?" (Morrison 23)

Mrs. MacTeer takes care of Pecola not because she loves being charitable but because she wants to maintain the outward appearance of being a good person. In fits of anger, Mrs. MacTeer's true feelings erupt. Critic Ogunyemi explains:

Mrs. MacTeer is also typical of the genteel, lower middle-class blacks who, despite their outward religiosity, are not charitable enough to tolerate the less privileged. They undertake charitable work merely to maintain a facade of good-neighborliness, underscored in Mrs. MacTeer's constant grumbling against Pecola when Pecola was her ward. (Ogunyemi 118)

Regardless of Mrs. MacTeer's true feelings, she does extend care to Pecola. Mrs. MacTeer's attitude is an example of the family folk practice of maintaining an appearance of charity in order to maintain the reputation of being a good person.

Another example of folk tradition is the treatment Pecola receives upon the occurrence of her first menstrual period. Pecola, in her ignorance of the physical change taking place in her body, thinks she is going to die. She turns to her friends, Claudia and Frieda, for help. Claudia

knows what is taking place and helps Pecola: "The children are forced to rely on each other for information, since adults make themselves so inaccessible" (Rosenberg 437). An interfering neighborhood girl tells Mrs. MacTeer that Frieda and Claudia are playing nasty. The girls quickly explain to their mother the truth of the situation because Mrs. MacTeer is whipping them for their bad behavior. Once Mrs. MacTeer realizes she has misunderstood the actions of the girls, she apologizes and immediately cares for the needs of Pecola. Afterwards, Claudia and Frieda are in awe of the new Pecola:

That night, in bed, the three of us lay still. We were full of awe and respect for Pecola. Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin' was somehow sacred. She was different from us now--grown-up-like. She, herself, felt the distance, but refused to lord it over us. (Morrison 28)

The surrogate family helps Pecola understand and takes care of her when she begins her first period. However, this same group fails in not preparing her in advance for this inevitable event of nature. This failure of adults in preparing children for such events is another example of family folk practice of the period.

Another family folk pattern in the novel is the insistence of Pecola's biological mother that she be called Mrs. Breedlove. Pecola, her brother, and father never refer to their mother and wife by any other name but Mrs.

Breedlove: "Pecola, like Sammy and Cholly, always called her mother Mrs. Breedlove" (Morrison 38). However, Mrs. Breedlove permits the young white girl that she takes care of to call her Polly. Claudia, the narrator, reacts to Mrs. Breedlove's allowing her employer's daughter to call her Polly: "The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her" (Morrison 86). This lack of warmth and closeness is a part of Pecola, Sammy, and her father's family environment.

Pecola learns that some members of her own race look upon her as a symbol of all the problems with the race, and she is treated as a scapegoat. The practice of scapegoating is another folk ritual. Pecola is tricked by a character named Junior to enter his home to see some kittens. After they enter the house, Junior picks up the cat and throws it at Pecola. He again picks up the cat, whirls him around, and lets the cat slam against the wall. Junior's mother walks in and sees in Pecola the ugliness of her own situation from which she tries to hide. Rushing into the mind of Junior's mother is everything she hates about Black

culture:

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. In the long, hot days, they idled away, picking plaster from the walls and digging into the earth with sticks. They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children; they clowned on the playgrounds, broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter. The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of the caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. (Morrison 75)

Junior's mother sees in Pecola the traditional role of what had historically come to be the worst part of Black

existence and culture. Using Pecola as a scapegoat, she unleashes her frustrations upon an innocent girl. This practice of selecting someone to be a scapegoat is also an example of the use of folk tradition in the novel.

Another folk element is the belief some Blacks hold that the North is some sort of Utopia. However, the dream that all is better in the North proves to be only a false notion to Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. Morrison includes a flashback in the narrative of the plot which demonstrates the dream Pauline and Cholly have that the North holds the answer to their dreams. In pursuit of their dream, Cholly and Pauline move to the North. At first, their lives take on a more positive and "normal" state:

Me and Cholly was getting along
good then. We come up north; supposed
to be more jobs and all. We moved into
two rooms up over a furniture store,
and I set about housekeeping. Cholly
was working at the steel plant, and
everything was looking good. (Morrison 93)

At this early point in their marriage, Cholly has a job; and Pauline takes care of the home. Sadly, the notion of the North being a better place for Blacks is revealed to be false. Harris writes in his article:

The setting mirrors perhaps one of

the greatest beliefs in black communities during and after slavery--the North is a freer place for black people economically and socially. It does not matter that Lorain, Ohio, is just a shade north of south or that Pauline Breedlove has only come from Kentucky, a couple of hundred miles away; it is still relevant that the city is north of where she was, that it holds out to her the traditional expectations of existence above the Mason Dixon line. It was irrelevant that some blacks arrived in the North and found conditions hardly better than the ones they thought they were escaping in the South. These migrants felt they had to hold out the promise to their relatives and friends in the South even if the promise has failed them. So tales circulated about how wonderful things could be "up North." (Harris 68)

Pauline and Cholly learn the North does not fulfill their expectation of the good life any more than the South does.

Later, Pauline finds escape from her world in her work

by becoming the ideal, valued servant. Her employer boasts: "We could never find anybody like Polly. She will **not** leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant" (Morrison 101). Pauline's actions show that she prefers the favor of her employee over the favor of her own family. Her performance on the job is a contrast to her actions as a mother. Mrs. Breedlove teaches her children to fear:

Them she bent toward respectability, and
in so doing taught them fear: fear of being
clumsy, fear of being like their father,
fear of not being loved by God, fear of
madness like Cholly's mother's. Into her
son she beat a fear of growing up, fear of
other people, fear of life. (Morrison 102)

Pauline feels that she is fulfilling the traditional role of the mother by her attitudes and actions:

. . . she was fulfilling a mother's role
conscientiously when she pointed out their
father's faults to keep them from having
them, or punished them when they showed any
slovenliness, no matter how slight, when
she worked twelve to sixteen hours a day to
support them. And the world itself agreed
with her. (Morrison 102)

Pauline Breedlove rears her children in the way she perceives the role of a traditional mother.

Sadly, Cholly Breedlove, Pauline's husband, can find no positive example to emulate in the way his parents behaved. Cholly "was four days old when his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (Morrison 105). Cholly's Aunt Jimmy rescues him and punishes his mother for her actions by beating her with a razor strap and never allowing her near the child again. Throughout the years, Cholly realizes that Aunt Jimmy took a delight in the telling of his rescue. Although Aunt Jimmy is the only one who cares for Cholly, she neglects him by not telling him the truth about his father at an earlier age: "He had four years of school before he got courage enough to ask his aunt who and where his father was" (Morrison 105). In his need for some understanding of his identity, Cholly asks about his father and why he is not carrying the first name of his father. Aunt Jimmy responds:

What for? He wasn't nowhere around
when you was born. Your mama didn't
name you nothing. The nine days wasn't
up before she throwed you on the junk
heap. When I got you I named you myself
on the ninth day. You named after my

dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man. Ain't no Samson never come to no good end. (Morrison 106)

Cholly feels that his father will understand his running away from the responsibility of fatherhood because his father had committed the same act. Cholly's actions as an adult are the result of the dysfunctional family he had as a child. Cholly's actions duplicate the lack of responsibility his father had with his mother when she became pregnant. Cholly had no other memory to draw upon except the example of fathering children and running away.

The quest in search of a lost parent is a folk pattern Morrison incorporates in her novel. This search is made in the hope the child can learn the answers to questions of identity and family history. However, Cholly's search is in the hope that his father will condone or at least understand his actions. After Cholly approaches his father and identifies himself, Cholly's father yells at Cholly and tells him to leave him alone. Then calmly, his father returns to his gambling game. Contrary to Cholly's expectations, his father wants nothing to do with him. Cholly does not receive the reassurance that he seeks from his father. All he receives are rejection, pain, and isolation.

This background of Cholly's does not prepare him to become a suitable or responsible father. Cholly is aware of

his shortcomings:

But the aspect of married life that dumbfounded him and rendered him totally dysfunctional was the appearance of children. Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be. Had he been interested in the accumulation of things, he could have thought of them as his material heirs; had he needed to prove himself to some nameless "others," he could have wanted them to excel in his own image and for his own sake. Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment. (Morrison 126-27)

After this realization, Cholly staggers home in a drunken

state and rapes his daughter Pecola, the ultimate heinous act. Cholly knows no right or wrong in how to accept the role of a father. In his mind and from his past, the act of rape perversely creates a sense of tenderness for his daughter. "The tenderness welled up in him . . . " (Morrison 128). He remembers the reaction of Pecola's mother when he nibbled on her calf and expects the same tenderness from Pecola. Cholly's lack of any other traditional example as a father leads him to believe that he is doing nothing out of the ordinary when he rapes his daughter. Bakerman comments on Cholly's situation:

But there is no one to explain
to Pecola. Her parents, Cholly and
Pauline, have accepted the idea that
they are ugly and in doing so have
come to hate one another. Equally
importantly, they do not know how to
love; and they cannot give their
children a sense of self, for they
have none of their own. Cholly,
parentless, set adrift by the death
of his guardian, taunted and humiliated
by white men during his first sexual
encounter, does not know about
nurturing love, and feeling love, he

is incapable of expressing it healthfully.

(Bakerman 544)

Cholly is typical of people who are unable to distinguish the right and wrong of what they see daily. He only perpetuates what he sees and learns.

Pecola becomes pregnant with her father's child. The culture around her is one that accepts this reality without censure. Claudia explains:

We did not think of the fact
that Pecola was not married; lots of
girls had babies who were not married.
And we did not dwell on the fact that
the baby's father was Pecola's
father too. (Morrison 148)

Those around Pecola and Claudia's family recognize that many women become pregnant out of wedlock. In Claudia's estimation, Pecola at least knew the name of the father of her child. As a result of Cholly's experiences in life, he perpetuates his unfortunate experiences through his actions. Through Cholly's rememory, he continues a folk practice began before his birth.

In Morrison's portrayal of the dysfunctional family, she includes the example of Pecola who never finds love and acceptance within her own family. Pecola is loved by various people, including the narrator Claudia and her sister Frieda,

but many of the people who say they love her cause her pain and suffering. Claudia recognizes that many people who love Pecola cause her pain, and she comments:

Oh, some of us "loved" her. The
Maginot Line. And Cholly loved her.
I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was
the one who loved her enough to touch
her, envelop her, give something of
himself to her. But his touch was fatal,
and the something he gave her filled
the matrix of her agony with death.
Love is never any better than the lover.
Wicked people love wickedly, violent
people love violently, weak people love
weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but
the love of a free man is never safe.
There is no gift for the beloved. The
lover alone possesses his gift of love.
The loved one is shorn, neutralized,
frozen in the glare of the lover's
inward eye. (Morrison 159-60)

Unfortunately for Pecola, those who love her are unable to provide her with unconditional love. A prostitute loves Pecola, and Pecola returns the love. Cholly loves Pecola, but his manifestation of this love is fatal to Pecola. The

love Pecola receives from Claudia and Frieda is the only love that does not harm her. The love of the wrong person can be more devastating than not being loved at all. Pecola suffers from having too many of the wrong people love her, and she escapes her reality through insanity: "She [Claudia] and Frieda confront the same world which destroys Pecola, but a stable family life supports them. Pecola has no support" (De Weever 404). Pecola's lack of a strong functional family is a fundamental reason for her insanity. Pecola is unable to survive emotionally and psychologically because she does not have the support and care of a family. Morrison's use of functional and dysfunctional family units in The Bluest Eye illustrates the influence of family folk traditions upon the characters in the novel.

CHAPTER THREE

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

Toni Morrison employs the actions and beliefs of her characters to present religious views in The Bluest Eye. Not only is Christian theology included but also conjuration theories are incorporated. Morrison's characters utilize these folk practices at different times in the novel to seek the success of their prayers. According to Harris, belief in whatever practice adhered to is important: "Belief is the single most important factor in conjuration as in Christianity" (Harris 73). Characters in the novel form religious traditions after periods of time and repeated occurrences. Younger characters duplicate actions of older family members. Through the characters' beliefs and rituals, religious folk practices are evident in The Bluest Eye.

One of the first examples of religious folk tradition is Mrs. MacTeer's pretense of being a good Christian lady when she cares for her ward, Pecola Breedlove. Most of the people in the novel look upon Mrs. MacTeer as a generous woman for opening her home to Pecola. However, her pretense of caring is exposed when she loses her temper with Pecola for drinking so much milk:

As if I don't have trouble enough trying
to feed my own and keep out the poorhouse.

I got about as much business with another
mouth to feed as a cat has with side pockets.
As if I don't have trouble enough trying
to feed my own and keep out the poorhouse,
now I got something else in here that's
just going to **drink** me on in there. Well,
naw, she ain't. But this has got to stop,
and I'm just the one to stop it. Bible
say watch as **well** as pray. (Morrison 23)

Mrs. MacTeer, in following what she perceives as the
tradition of Christianity, quotes or paraphrases scripture
or what she takes to be scripture to support her actions
regarding her care of Pecola. Toward the close of her angry
speech, she makes references to the Bible for additional
support:

Bible say feed the hungry. That's
fine. That's all right. But I ain't
feeding no elephants. . . . Anybody need
three quarts of milk **to** live need to get
out of here. They in the wrong place.
What is this? Some kind of **dairy** farm?
(Morrison 25)

Morrison reveals that Mrs. MacTeer is familiar with
scriptures through her actions. In religious doctrine,
scriptures are taught to give believers strength and support

when needs arise. Also, scriptures guide the believer in making correct decisions and in taking appropriate actions. Mrs. MacTeer uses scriptures for assurance that she has not said any inappropriate words or taken any inappropriate actions. In quoting scriptures, Mrs. MacTeer employs religious ritual.

Toni Morrison includes an example of religious folk tradition through the actions of Pauline Breedlove. Pauline sees herself as a religious woman. She attends church and does other visible activities expected of a Christian woman. However, Pauline believes that she is burdened with a worthless husband. She seeks in her religious practice a supreme judge who will pass sentence upon her husband:

Mrs. Breedlove considered herself
an upright and Christian woman,
burdened with a no-count man, whom
God wanted her to punish (Cholly
was beyond redemption, of course,
and redemption was hardly the
point--Mrs. Breedlove was not
interested in Christ the Redeemer,
but rather Christ the Judge.) Often
she could be heard discoursing with
Jesus about Cholly, pleading with Him
to help her "strike the bastard down

from his pea-knuckle of pride." And once when a drunken gesture catapulted Cholly into the red-hot stove, she screamed, "Get him, Jesus! Get him!" If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became. In the name of Jesus. (Morrison 37)

Pauline Breedlove practices her religious faith by thinking that believers have burdens to endure. In her view of righteousness, she believes that Jesus will punish the person doing her wrong; however, at the same time Pauline Breedlove loves the burden she has to bear. The burden gives her a degree of sympathy and respect from her fellow church ladies. Also, this reflects the tradition of calling aloud to God. Mrs. Breedlove calls aloud to God many times during the fights she has with her husband. Through observation and repetition, her daughter learns to behave in the same way. During one of the physical fights that the mother and father have, Pecola speaks aloud to God and asks Him to allow her to disappear: "Please make me disappear" (Morrison 39). Pecola internalizes the repetition of hearing her mother pray; and when an occasion arises, Pecola

follows the religious pattern learned from her mother.

Another example of religious folklore involves Pecola. Throughout the novel, Pecola desires blue eyes. Blue eyes are the symbol of acceptance and beauty not only to Pecola but also to everyone she knows. Pecola has been taught by her parents that she is ugly, but Pecola does not want to accept this judgment. She desperately wants to obtain not just blue eyes but the bluest eyes. In Pecola's desire, she prays fervently for blue eyes. Pecola's past religious experiences teach her that prayer changes things if one believes and has faith. Because Pecola believes and has faith, she perseveres even when her prayers are not immediately answered:

Each night, without fail, she prayed
for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year
she had prayed. Although somewhat
discouraged, she was not without hope.
To have something as wonderful as that
happen would take a long, long time.

(Morrison 40)

To Pecola, having blue eyes is the solution to all her problems. Pecola believes her problems will disappear if she possesses the beauty of blue eyes. She continues to hold the belief that with prayer and patience she will get the blue eyes that she so desires. Pecola never realizes that

she is praying for the impossible. This practice of praying for blue eyes is a religious ritual, and it reflects a hope for a miracle. Harris writes: "Beliefs that are adhered to over long periods of time and repeated occurrences can be defined as rituals" (Harris 73). Therefore, Pecola's desire for blue eyes does not seem an impossibility to Pecola because of her strong belief.

Another example of religious folk practice involves the prostitutes in the novel. Realizing they are not models of Christian conduct, the prostitutes are still able to recognize Christianity in others:

Neither did they have respect for women, who, although their colleagues, so to speak, nevertheless deceived their husbands--regularly or irregularly, it made no difference. "Sugar-coated whores," they called them, and did not yearn to be in their shoes. Their only respect was for what they would have described as "good Christian colored women." The woman whose reputation was spotless, and who tended to her family, who didn't drink or smoke or run around. These women had their undying, if covert, affection. They would sleep

with their husbands, and take their
money, but always with a vengeance.

(Morrison 48)

Although these women do not practice what they believe makes a "good Christian colored woman," they do know from the lessons of their childhoods what such a woman is.

Another example of religious folk tradition in the novel involves Pauline Breedlove. As noted earlier, Pauline sees her husband Cholly as a burden. She also sees her Maker as someone who will take care of her. Pauline is of the mind that what happens to her upon earth does not matter because she will receive her reward at the end of her life:

But I don't care 'bout it no more.
My Maker will take care of me. I
know He will. I know He will. Besides,
it don't make no difference about this
old earth. There is sure to be a glory.

(Morrison 104)

Belief in an afterlife has been transmitted to Pauline. This belief is internalized, and she fully expects to be taken care of by her Maker on earth and in the afterlife.

Another tradition involving religious folk belief concerns God and how he looks. Cholly expresses his concept of God's appearance:

God was a nice old white man, with

long white hair, flowing white beard,
and little blue eyes that looked sad
when people died and mean when they
were bad (Morrison 106).

Cholly's image of God as a white man is based upon his past experiences. One experience involves an event at a church picnic. A Black man lifts a watermelon over his head. As Cholly watches, Cholly wonders if God looks like the Black man, standing tall with his arms raised over his head. Almost immediately, Cholly recalls that God is a white man. Someone in Cholly's past internalized this image of God because a Black man would not visualize a white God unless led to this vision. Through this event, Morrison shows how Cholly recalls a religious tradition taught him years earlier.

The culminating example of religious folk tradition in The Bluest Eye is Pecola's appearing before Soaphead Church and asking for blue eyes. Soaphead Church advertises that he has capabilities of granting wishes. Characters in the novel believe that he has abilities to grant their requests. When Pecola prayed for blue eyes, she never doubts that her prayers will someday be answered. Pecola believes that Soaphead will be able to grant her wish. Soaphead Church knows that he is unable to grant her wish, but he is unable to admit this. When Pecola asks for blue eyes, Soaphead

tells her to feed a dog. This dog irritates Soaphead, and he wants it dead. Because he is unable to kill the dog himself, Soaphead gives Pecola poisoned meat for the dog. Soaphead tells Pecola that she will have blue eyes the next morning if the dog behaves strangely. The dog does act strangely after eating poisoned meat. Pecola sees only the abnormal behavior of the dog and is thus convinced that she will have blue eyes the next morning.

After allowing Pecola to leave thinking her wish for blue eyes is to become reality, Soaphead Church writes a letter to God. In this letter, he confesses his own sins and writes that he has granted Pecola's wish for blue eyes. He also chastises God for forgetting the children:

You have to understand that, Lord.
You said, "Suffer little children
to come unto me, and harm them not."
Did you forget? Did you forget about
the children? Yes. You forgot. You
let them go wanting, sit on road
shoulders, crying next to their dead
mothers. I've seen them charred, lame,
halt. You forgot, Lord. You forgot
how and when to be God. (Morrison 143)

Soaphead Church tells God that He has forgotten the children. Soaphead takes it upon himself to tell Pecola

that he can grant her wish. Soaphead realizes that no one but Pecola will see the blue eyes, but she will because Soaphead knows that Pecola believes what he has told her. Pecola's experience causes her to believe that Soaphead can give her what her many prayers to God have not. Soaphead Church believes that he has created a miracle:

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave
her the eyes. I gave her the blue,
blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue.
A streak of it right out of your own
blue heaven. But **she** will. And
she will live happily ever after. I
I have found it meet and right so to
do. (Morrison 143)

Soaphead Church relies upon the traditions ingrained in the culture to make Pecola believe that he has the power to grant her wish for blue eyes.

A further example of religious folk tradition involves the attempt at a miracle by Claudia and her sister Frieda. After Pecola becomes pregnant, these two girls decide they can make a miracle happen. Miracles, they have been told, come through prayer. Claudia and Frieda search for some way to help Pecola: "We could pray" (Morrison 149). Claudia and Frieda remember an injured bird that they once prayed for. Remembering the bird died in spite of their

prayers, Claudia and Frieda conclude that prayer this time is not enough. They decide to tell God that they will be good for a month and will give up the money they will earn by selling seeds in order to buy a new bicycle. They bury the money by Pecola's house and plant the seeds at their home. When the flowers come up, the girls will know that Pecola's baby will be all right. Although something of a ritual, these two girls are demonstrating religious traditions taught to them by parents or others in their earlier years.

Religious traditions in The Bluest Eye show the internalized transmission of the various practices the characters were taught. Through repetition, the characters have in their "rememory" the ability to call upon religion and its rituals.

CHAPTER FOUR

FOLK SONG AND FOLK MUSIC

A mainstay of Black culture has historically been the folk traditions involving song and music. These cultural traditions originated in Africa long before Blacks were brought to America as slaves. Adverse conditions of slavery enhanced the established traditions of song and music and also inspired the creation of new traditions. Courlander comments:

We know that numerous tales associated with slave life or later plantation experiences came from Africa or were adaptations of African narrations; that U. S. Negro secular and religious music, while created under the influence of a variety of traditions, contains some characteristics that are clearly African; and that certain traditional African approaches to story telling and music-making survive to the present day.

(Courlander 255)

These age-old traditions of song and music enabled those in the Black culture to cope with personal success and failure or personal happiness and unhappiness in the midst of slavery.

These two folk practices also recorded cultural traditions and offered emotional release to their practitioners. Song and music as a means of coping are the folk traditions Toni Morrison weaves into the plot of The Bluest Eye.

Traditions of song are plentiful in Black culture and in Morrison's novel. Placing limitations on the definition or classification of song is nearly impossible as Black culture has created a song for almost every occasion. As the years passed, Black culture retained many African traditions and added new American ones. As a result of the combination of the African practices and the newly formed American traditions, limitless possibilities for song as a folk element developed. Courlander explains:

Negro spirituals, worksongs, blues, ballads and other forms have characteristics which distinguish them from the folk music of Africa and Europe, not only in their musical content but in their lyrical content as well, even though certain African and European elements may be recognized. . . . Oral literature contains elements of humor, irony, criticism and poetry that, in a literary sense, are uniquely expressed.

It observes, it comments, it narrates.

It ranges from humorous nonsense to
profound and moving reflections on the
human experience. (Courlander 256)

In The Bluest Eye, Morrison integrates the events in her characters' lives and their use of song in the plot of her novel. As Morrison's characters face different situations, they rely upon various traditional songs to help them survive these situations. In fact, Morrison's characters create songs when a traditional choice is nonexistent. Courlander comments on improvisation: "But there is to be found nothing like the freedom of improvisation and invention that is characteristic of secular music" (Courlander 302). Courlander's remarks are consistent with Morrison's use of songs in her novel as Morrison includes an array of songs that are improvised, songs that express confusing emotions or pent up emotions, and songs that represent escape in the plot of her novel The Bluest Eye.

During the plot development, Morrison includes songs that are improvised by her characters for special occasions. Poland is a character whose life is full of song. Morrison characterizes Poland as " . . . forever singing" (Morrison 44) and as the one who "hummed mostly or changed blues songs, of which she knew many" (Morrison 45). As one of the

prostitutes living above the Breedlove's store, Poland sings of her problems. One example of Poland's singing about a problem occurs when she dresses for work:

I got blues in my mealbarrel

Blues up on the shelf

I got blues in my mealbarrel

Blues up on the shelf

Blues in my bedroom

'Cause I'm sleepin' by myself. (Morrison 44)

Poland's singing is her way of expressing her inner feelings. She utilizes the tradition of the blues and improvises a song to fit her personal situation. Using the events in her life as a catalyst, Poland selects meaningful words for her song. Courlander describes the traditional blues that Poland sings:

. . . the traditional blues form is a vehicle used to express regret, remorse, or discontent with life. It tells the world about one's misfortunes, airs complaints against a person or a community, points a finger at someone who has caused suffering or injury, articulates a sense of injustice, or communicates a feeling of abuse, unhappiness, or

melancholy. Men or women who have
 been unfaithful, or who have gone away
 or who have treated one badly are the
 subject of many blues. (Courlander 511)

Poland employs the blues in expressing her feelings regarding life and her role in life. For example, the song Poland sings as she dresses for her evening of prostitution expresses her awareness that when her bed is empty, she sings the blues because she makes no money unless a man shares her bed with her. Poland, therefore, sings her songs and expresses her discontent with the reality of life. According to Courlander, this form of blues song is a folk pattern.

Morrison incorporates events and songs in the novel as outlets for emotions which her characters do not understand or as outlets for her characters' pent up emotions. One instance of a song expressing the emotional reaction a character has over an event involves Freida, Claudia's sister. Claudia is sick and is in bed. Freida feels useless because she is unable to help her sister. After their mother Mrs. MacTeer treats Claudia, Freida enters Claudia's room and bursts into song. Claudia recalls Freida's song:

My sister comes in. Her eyes are
 full of sorrow. She sings to me:
 "When the deep purple falls over

sleepy garden walls, someone
thinks of me . . . " I doze,
thinking of plums, walls, and
"someone." (Morrison 14)

Freida comforts her sister in the only way she knows, via the words of a song. This gift makes Claudia aware that Freida feels empathy for the discomfort that she experiences. Appropriate words of comfort do not come easily to Freida, but the words to a song flow from her lips. Although the words to Freida's song may not fit the situation, Freida employs this cultural tradition as the outlet for her sadness over her sister's illness. Much like Poland employs the use of blues to express her human experience, Freida also uses a form of the blues to express her sorrow about her sister's illness. When no other avenue of expression exists, folk song is available to these women.

An example of song as an outlet for pent up emotions involves Claudia's mother, Mrs. MacTeer. Claudia recalls that as a young child, her mother's singing held special meaning for Freida and herself. In her memory, Claudia describes one time when she and her sister Freida rejoice at hearing their mother burst into spontaneous singing. This memory centers around the occurrence when Mrs. MacTeer loses her patience with Pecola for drinking so much milk. Claudia recalls that her mother would become fussy about

something, such as Pecola's drinking too much milk, and rant and rave for hours. Mrs. MacTeer's prolonged fussing irritates and depresses Claudia and Freida. Claudia describes her mother's actions at this time as being indirect because her mother never specifically names anyone in her tirades; but according to Claudia, Mrs. MacTeer tells off everyone before reaching the point that Freida and Claudia anxiously anticipate. Finally, Mrs. MacTeer bursts into song, signaling the conclusion of her tirade. At this point, Claudia and Freida also experience feelings of release and joy because their mother has completed her fussing:

My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting, and although indirect Mama never named anybody--just talked about folks and **some** people, extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours, connecting one offense to another until all of the things that chagrined her were spewed out. Then, having told everybody and everything off, she would burst into song and sing the rest of the day. But it was such a long time before the singing

part came. (Morrison 23)

The memory of their mother's singing instills the tradition of song in Freida and Claudia's memories. Each time either girl recalls their mother's habit of singing to vent her emotions, the girls cement this folk expression in their minds.

Claudia recalls another memory involving her mother's singing. This memory of her mother's singing also brings pleasant thoughts. Mrs. MacTeer, according to Claudia, sings about everything when she is in a singing mood:

If my mother was in a singing mood,
it wasn't so bad. She would sing
about hard times, bad times, and
somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times.
But her voice was so sweet and her
singing so melty I found myself
longing for those hard times, yearning
to be grown without "a thin di-i-ime
to my name." I looked forward to the
delicious time when "my man" would
leave me, when I would "hate to see
that evening sun go down . . ." 'cause
then I would know "my man has left this
town." Misery colored by the greens
and blues in my mother's voice took all

of the grief out of the words and left
me with a conviction that pain was not
only enduring, it was sweet.

(Morrison 24)

Through the repetition of hearing her mother sing, Claudia establishes in her memory the tradition of song. Claudia recalls the pattern of her mother's singing and the various events that trigger the reaction of song from her mother. These events and memories are stored in Claudia's "rememory." Whenever Claudia needs the same release that she witnessed in her mother, Claudia's "rememory" may recall her mother's folk practice of song.

Later in the development of the plot, Freida and Claudia employ their own custom of song to express their emotions. Their friend Pecola is pregnant, and the two young girls are confused at the people's reactions to Pecola's pregnancy. The girls hear conversations that include the idea that it will be a miracle if Pecola's baby lives. Others say that the baby will be even more ugly than Pecola, and procreation ought to be against the law for two people as ugly as Pecola and her father. Freida and Claudia also hear that the baby will be better off dead and in the ground than alive if it is as ugly as the parents. Hearing these comments confuses Claudia and Freida because they both care about Pecola and want Pecola's baby to live. Not knowing how to handle

their emotions, Freida and Claudia seek recourse in a ritual containing song. Freida and Claudia's ritual involves the belief of planting marigold seeds to invoke a miracle. Following the steps in the "rememory" ritual, the two girls plant the marigold seeds and wait for a miracle to save Pecola and her unborn baby. Because Claudia wants to be sure they make no mistake in the ceremony, Claudia asks to sing and wants Freida to say the magic words. Puckett explains this folk practice:

As a matter of fact the ordinary
Negro prayer is really, in a sense,
a spontaneous song, since it is often
sung as a sort of chant, and in
moments of earnestness stilted phrases
are laid aside and particular individuals
are prayed for by name after humming
over the particular besetting sins.

(Puckett 62)

In an effort to clarify their confusion over Pecola's condition, Claudia and Freida utilize this ritual. Their use of song during the ceremony releases the conflicting feelings the two girls have over Pecola and over what Freida and Claudia hear the adults say. Through Claudia and Freida's performance of this folk ritual, Morrison exhibits another example of folk practice involving song.

Morrison's characters also sing as a means of escape. Escape songs are another cultural element which originated in Africa. When life becomes too stressful and too difficult to accept, Morrison's characters escape their conditions by singing of better circumstances or of a better place. Singing of a better situation keeps hope alive that someday life will become more bearable. Folk songs of escape are included in The Bluest Eye.

One example of this occurs when Claudia hears her mother, Mrs. MacTeer, sing an escape song. Mrs. MacTeer is alone in her kitchen and is not aware that anyone hears her. Claudia describes her mother's song of escape:

Then I heard my mother singing something about trains and Arkansas. She came in the back door with some folded yellow curtains which she piled on the kitchen table. I sat down on the floor to listen to the song's story, and noticed how strangely she was behaving. She still had her hat on, and her shoes were dusty, as though she had been walking in deep dirt. She put on some water to boil and then swept the porch; then she hauled out the curtain stretcher, but instead of putting the damp curtains on

it, she swept the porch again. All
the time singing about trains and
Arkansas. (Morrison 78)

At this point in her life, Claudia does not fully grasp the meaning of the escape song that her mother sings. However, Claudia soon learns that her sister has been fondled by a man; but at this time in her life, Claudia lacks the maturity to understand her mother's motivation in singing a song of escape. Nevertheless, Claudia stores the incident in her memory and recalls her mother's escape song years later.

Another event in the novel involving the use of an escape song occurs in Pauline Breedlove's fantasy of escape. Pauline remembers the effect songs had upon her when she was 15 years old. Pauline fantasizes, and " . . . songs caressed, . . . " (Morrison 90). Because her fantasy often occurs in church, Pauline struggles to keep her mind upon the "the wages of sin, her body trembled for redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen, with no effort on her part" (Morrison 90). In her fantasy, Pauline sees a woman named Ivy, who possesses the ability to put into song all the emotions Pauline feels:

There was a woman named Ivy who
seemed to hold in her mouth all of
the sounds of Pauline's soul. Standing

a little apart from the choir, Ivy sang
 the dark sweetness that Pauline could
 not name; she sang the death-defying death
 that Pauline yearned for; she sang of the
 Stranger who **knew**. . . . (Morrison 90)

A woman named Ivy sings Pauline's song of escape. Pauline is unable to verbalize her feelings into song; but through Ivy's words, Pauline finds her mental and her emotional release.

Songs as folk expressions are utilized by Morrison's characters in The Bluest Eye through improvised lyrics, through expressing confusing or pent up emotions, and through escaping from reality. In all examples, songs express the inner emotions of the characters. This expression of inner feelings shows Morrison's characters weaving folk habits into the events of their lives.

Closely related to song as a folk tradition is music. As Morrison's characters verbalize their emotions through the words of a song, her characters also employ the use of music as an expression of their emotions. Morrison incorporates music into the lives of her characters as a pleasant association with a memory, a way of explaining more clearly her characters' feelings, and an example of the preservation of Black culture.

An example of Morrison's use of music surrounding a

pleasant memory occurs in the fantasy Pauline Breedlove has while in church. As Pauline's mind wanders from the proceedings of the church service, a stranger appears in Pauline's fantasy. This stranger is a man who fascinates Pauline. When in reality Pauline meets her fantasy man, she recalls music surrounds this event. Pauline remembers music as a part of the stranger's facade:

He came strutting right out of a
Kentucky sun on the hottest day of
the year. He came big, he came
strong, he came with yellow eyes,
flaring nostrils, and he came with
his own music. . . . A kind of
city-street music where laughter
belies anxiety, and joy is as short
and straight as the blade of a
pocketknife. She listened carefully
to the music and let it pull her lips
into a smile. The whistling got louder,
and still she did not turn around, for
she wanted it to last. (Morrison 91)

Reality for Pauline does not remain so romantic as the memory of first meeting her future husband, Cholly Breedlove. However, the memory of music surrounding this meeting is pleasant; and the music removes the unpleasantness in the

reality of the relationship she and Cholly had during their marriage.

Music explains more clearly the characters' emotions. Morrison's character Cholly Breedlove illustrates this. An event at a picnic triggers Cholly's thoughts of God and Cholly's idea of God's physical appearance. As Cholly watches a friend stand tall and reach toward the heavens, Cholly wonders if God resembles this friend. Cholly visualizes God as tall and as powerful as his friend. When Cholly's mind returns to reality, he hears music in the distance. Someone in the distance plays a mouth organ:

Far away somebody was playing a mouth organ; the music slithered over the cane fields and into the pine grove; it spiraled around the tree trunks and mixed itself with the pine scent, so Cholly couldn't tell the difference between the sound and the odor that hung about the heads of the people.

(Morrison 107)

Cholly's emotions during this part of the novel are in turmoil. While Cholly wonders how God looks, he thinks that God never excites him; but his thoughts about the devil do excite him. The music that he hears in the distance calms Cholly's disturbed emotions concerning his preference

of the Devil over God. In Cholly's memory, music is the calming folk custom of his culture that he utilizes at this juncture in his life.

During a later event in his life, Cholly relies upon music to find order amid his confusion. At this time in his life, Cholly ponders how disorderly and confusing his life has been. This bewilderment perplexes Cholly. In an attempt to make his life more coherent, Cholly turns to music. In Cholly's mind, only a musician can find meaning in his life. Cholly believes that a musician possesses the ability to take unrelated items and create the harmony that Cholly lacks. Morrison describes Cholly's feelings regarding his life:

The pieces of Cholly's life
could become coherent only in the
head of a musician. Only those who
talk their talk through the gold of
curved metal, or in the touch of
black-and-white rectangles and taut
skins and strings echoing from wooden
corridors, could give true form to his
life. Only they would know how to
connect the heart of a red watermelon
to the asafetida bag to the muscadine to
the flashlight on his behind to the

fists of money to the lemonade in a
Mason jar to a man called Blue and come up
with what all of that meant in joy, in
pain, in anger, in love, and give it
its final and pervading ache of freedom.
Only a musician would sense, know, without
even knowing that he knew, that Cholly
was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel
whatever he felt--fear, guilt, shame,
love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or
violent, to whistle or weep. Free to
sleep in doorways or between the white
sheets of a singing woman. Free to take
a job, free to leave it. (Morrison 125-26)

Cholly views his life as disjointed events, but he wants to
see continuity and reason for being in his life.

Although Cholly lacks the ability to piece together the
events of his life into a meaningful pattern, a musician,
he feels, possesses the ability to accomplish what he is
unable to do. Cholly thinks a musician not only can find
the meaning in his life but also can recognize that Cholly
is a free person unrestrained by social expectations. In
Cholly's memory and in his culture, music presents order to
a culture familiar to disorder. As Cholly's ancestors turned
to music for orderliness, Cholly emulates this practice in

his life.

Song and music explain many of the characters' feelings in Morrison's novel The Bluest Eye. Through these two avenues of folk practice, Morrison relays to the readers the problems her characters face and how song and music are cultural traditions that aid her characters in reaching some level of acceptance or harmony in their lives. A result of Morrison's including Black culture in her novel is that many cultural traditions of song and music are recorded for future generations to study and to enjoy.

CHAPTER FIVE

MEDICAL PRACTICES AND DEATH RITUALS

Since the beginning of time, people of all cultures have established unique rituals to cope with the realities of sickness and death. Although these rituals may vary from one culture to another, the practitioners of folk traditions summon from their rememory cultural resources for assistance during times of distress. Through rememory, long-forgotten folk practices are reborn. The characters in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye follow the rememory tradition and solicit bygone but not forgotten rituals for solace and help when illness or death befalls. Included in the plot of The Bluest Eye is a compendium not only of folk traditions of family, religion, song, and music but also traditions of medicine and death.

As part of Morrison's plot, events occur that indicate preventive medical folk practices are a necessity. Levine writes in Black Culture and Black Consciousness: "One of the more obvious and common uses to which slave folk beliefs were put was the protection and preservation of health" (Levine 63). The protection and preservation of health is reflected in the belief that something worn with an odor will keep away the evil spirits and disease. Puckett explains:

The Negro theory of prevention of disease is closely allied to the African or early European one of using odoriferous substances, which at first, no doubt, were intended to keep the disease spirit away. Asafetida is eaten, or, as is more frequently the case, is worn in a little bag around the neck. (Puckett 391-92)

An advocate of wearing the asafetida in Morrison's novel is Cholly's Aunt Jimmy. Aunt Jimmy believes in the asafetida and wears one most of the time: " . . . she [Aunt Jimmy] wore the asafetida bag around her neck" (Morrison 105). Because doctors were expensive or non-existent in Black communities, Aunt Jimmy remembers when she was a child, her family relied upon the asafetida bag. The use of an asafetida bag is a practice that Aunt Jimmy continues as an adult. Harris states: "Home remedies and items that could be purchased without prescriptions were relied on" (Harris 69). Aunt Jimmy's use of the asafetida is a home remedy that allows her to protect and preserve her health without the expense of a doctor.

Families not only relied upon the asafetida bag but

also the use of Black Draught, Castor Oil, and Vick's salve to ward off disease. The fear of needing a doctor is shown in Claudia's explanation of how adults look upon the children when one of them gets hurt or becomes ill: "Our illness is treated with contempt, foul Black Draught, and castor oil that blunts our minds" (Morrison 130).

Immediately following this explanation of prevention in the novel, the narrator Claudia coughs; and this cough brings panic to her mother. Her mother sends Claudia to bed and scolds her for going outside without wearing something on her head. An hour or so after Claudia goes to bed, her mother enters the bedroom to perform a ritual. Mrs. MacTeer rubs Vick's salve on Claudia's chest until her chest is actually filled with pain. After the chest rub, her mother takes a large amount of Vick's and puts it into Claudia's mouth and tells her to swallow. Finally, the mother places a hot flannel wrap about Claudia's neck and chest: "I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do--promptly" (Morrison 13). Claudia knows that to resist would be futile; therefore, she endures her mother's traditional treatment of fighting and preventing the cough.

Another example of preventing disease is the reference Claudia makes about the approaching winter months. Claudia describes special precautions her family takes for the approaching winter:

We put pepper in the feet of our
stockings, Vaseline on our faces,
and stared through dark icebox
mornings at four stewed prunes,
slippery lumps of oatmeal, and cocoa
with a roof of skin. (Morrison 52)

The rationale of these treatments does not exist in medical circles but does exist in the families' past and in their medical folklore. These folk medical examples show the caution exhibited by the characters in The Bluest Eye in their struggle to prevent a disease or illness.

Morrison uses Pauline Breedlove's experience during childbirth to focus on a medical myth white doctors have that Black women feel no pain during childbirth. Pauline goes to the hospital for the birth of her second child because she wants to be free of the pain she experienced with the birth of her first child, Pecola. However, Mrs. Breedlove learns the white doctors believe Black women do not feel pain during childbirth. While Pauline is in labor, many older white doctors bring inexperienced young white doctors by her bed in order to teach the younger doctors how to deliver babies. Pauline listens to one older white doctor as he instructs: "They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses"

(Morrison 99). To prove to these white doctors that this belief is totally wrong and that Black women feel pain the same as white women, Mrs. Breedlove ". . . moaned something awful. The pains wasn't as bad as I let on, but I had to let them people know having a baby was more than a bowel movement" (Morrison 99). Thus, in her own way, Mrs. Breedlove teaches the younger white doctors who are observing and learning from the women laboring to have a child. Although trained in the scientific tradition, these doctors incorporate folk beliefs in their instruction of the younger doctors when they assume that Black women have no pain giving birth to a child. This belief is an erroneous myth that the white doctors hold about Black women.

Another example of folk medicine is the blending of folk medical treatments offered to Aunt Jimmy when she becomes ill. Aunt Jimmy is Cholly Breedlove's aunt who becomes ill during a very chilly spring. Her illness is believed to have originated at a camp meeting that she attends after heavy thunderstorms. At the meeting, Aunt Jimmy sits on damp benches; and afterwards, she becomes ill. Upon learning of Aunt Jimmy's illness, her friends visit her and bring their folk remedies. Some of Aunt Jimmy's friends bring camomile tea; some rub her with a liniment. Advice is also given to Aunt Jimmy: "Don't eat no whites of eggs," "Drink new milk," and "Chew on this root" (Morrison

208). All of these remedies have been successful defenses against disease for these women, and they want Aunt Jimmy to fight her illness and to survive using the best treatment available.

The midwife is a medical figure Morrison's characters utilize in The Bluest Eye. When Aunt Jimmy's illness worsens, the midwife is summoned. In The Bluest Eye, this midwife is M'Dear: "In any illness that could not be handled by ordinary means--known cures, intuition, or endurance--the word was always, 'Fetch M'Dear'" (Morrison 108). According to M'Dear, Aunt Jimmy's illness is a cold in her womb. Her instructions to Aunt Jimmy are to drink pot liquor and nothing else. M'Dear's instructions are followed, and improvement occurs. Several days later, Aunt Jimmy is out of bed and receives a visitor, Essie Foster. Essie leaves a peach cobbler for Aunt Jimmy. The next morning Cholly finds Aunt Jimmy dead. M'Dear cannot be blamed for her death because Aunt Jimmy's health improved; therefore, the peach cobbler receives the blame for Aunt Jimmy's death. Aunt Jimmy's friends discuss how surprised they are that Jimmy even eats the peach cobbler: "But a pie is the worse thing to give anybody ailing. I'm surprised Jimmy didn't know better" (Morrison 112). The strength of their belief in a midwife and of their need for a person to help never allows Aunt Jimmy's friends to consider other reasons

as the cause of Aunt Jimmy's death.

Another example of medical folk tradition is the character named Soaphead Church, a conjurer. Soaphead had once "dallied with the priesthood in the Anglican Church . . ." (Morrison 130). However, not all of Soaphead's past is as pure as the priesthood. By his own admission, Soaphead states his lack of courage prevented him from being a homosexual when he was younger. Additionally, Soaphead admits physical contact with adults disgusts him; but he does not feel disgust towards little girls. Realizing the problem with his emotions, Soaphead controls his feelings for little girls. After trying several professions, he selected "Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams." Soaphead counsels the people who seek his service. His clientele have asked for love, health, money, and interpretations of dreams. Pecola Breedlove goes to Soaphead and asks for blue eyes because she believes the answers to all her problems lie in possessing blue eyes. When Pecola approaches Soaphead, she hands him a card that reads:

If you are overcome with trouble and
conditions that are not natural, I can
remove them; Overcome Spells, Bad Luck,
and Evil Influences. Remember, I am a true
Spiritualist and Psychic Reader, born with power,

and I will help you. Satisfaction in one visit. During many years of practice I have brought together many in marriage and reunited many who were separated. If you are unhappy, discouraged, or in distress, I can help you. Does bad luck seem to follow you? Has the one you love changed? I can tell you why. I will tell you who your enemies and friends are, and if the one you love is true or false. If you are sick, I can show you the way to health. I locate lost and stolen articles. Satisfaction guaranteed.

(Morrison 137)

With such an endorsement, Pecola asks Soaphead to provide her with the blue eyes that she believes will solve all of her problems. Soaphead's reaction to Pecola's request is not one of total shock but one of immediate understanding. Looking at Pecola, Soaphead sees her ugliness and realizes blue eyes will make her lovelier. However, he is angered that of all the requests ever made to him, he is unable to grant Pecola's wish. Soaphead knows her wish represents Pecola's desire not only to rise up and to see the world in different eyes but also her desire to be seen in different

eyes by others around her. Soaphead does his conjuring and sends Pecola away believing that she will awaken the next morning with blue eyes. The young girl's faith in Soaphead's powers is so strong that no one could have explained to Pecola that Soaphead lacks any necessary power to change the color of her eyes. Soaphead represents hope to Pecola and to others who ask him for advice because Soaphead's clients believe in his powers. The characters' belief in Soaphead's ability is an example of another medical folk practice observed by Morrison's characters.

Morrison's characters, Claudia and Frieda, practice another medical tradition when they conduct a ritual for Pecola Breedlove's unborn baby. Claudia and Frieda are Pecola's friends who believe they can save her unborn baby. Claudia and Frieda love Pecola and see beyond the fact that Pecola became pregnant after being raped by her father. Other children who know Pecola also do not think badly about Pecola because they know many girls who are not married yet have children. However, these children are aware that a great hatred exists for this unborn child; but they do not understand why this unborn baby is hated. Claudia and Frieda see the mistreatment of Pecola when she is knocked down by adults and when she is made fun of by other children. Possibly, the only two who fully sympathize with Pecola are Claudia and Frieda:

Our astonishment was short-lived, for
it gave way to a curious kind of
defensive shame; we were
embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her,
and finally we just felt sorry for
her." (Morrison 148)

In an attempt to clarify their misunderstanding of why
everyone hates Pecola's unborn baby and to do something to
help Pecola, Claudia and Frieda plant marigold seeds, a folk
ritual of survival. When the seeds come up, the new flower
becomes a sign that everything will be all right:

Folk beliefs too provided hope,
assurance, and a sense of group
identification, but they had
another dimension as well: they
actually offered the slaves sources
of power and knowledge alternative
to those existing within the world
of the master class. (Levine 63)

Regardless of the ritual and of Claudia and Frieda's love,
Pecola's baby dies. As a result of the baby's death, Claudia
and Frieda blame themselves for not performing the ritual
correctly or for not having enough faith in the ceremony.
The two girls believe the flower seeds possess medicinal and
magical powers which can save Pecola's child. As in other

instances when folk beliefs fail, the characters do not blame their methods; they blame themselves. Blaming themselves is indicative of the characters' deep faith in the medical folk rituals they practice.

The medical folk customs in The Bluest Eye have their origins many years prior to the events included in this novel. Years earlier, the ancestors of Morrison's characters practiced these beliefs and perpetuated them through repetition. Throughout the generations that followed, these practices were internalized and became a part of the traditions adhered to by Morrison's characters in The Bluest Eye.

As traditions of medicine are passed from one generation to another, rituals of death are also one generation's gift to succeeding generations. Through the characters' rememory, cultural rituals surrounding death surface when a character dies. Anyone who experiences a loved one's death recognizes the traditions in The Bluest Eye of friends and family gathering to offer strength, of food being brought to the deceased's home to feed the friends and relatives, of selecting clothes and a coffin in which to bury the dead, of taking care of family left homeless by the person's death, and of friends and neighbors taking over the operation of the household. The events in The Bluest Eye are no exception.

Toni Morrison presents much folk tradition through the death of one of her characters, Aunt Jimmy. Harris explains the rituals surrounding death in the novel:

Beliefs that are adhered to over long periods of time and repeated occurrences can be defined as rituals. One of these operative in Morrison's novel is the ritual surrounding the funeral of Aunt Jimmy; certainly the funeral itself is a ritual, but so too is the traditional gathering of neighbors, relatives, and friends immediately after the death. They come as if in a dance, to perform the movements that custom and tradition have assigned to them. First, they must prepare for the burial. Then, they prepare food for those who come from near and far. They, and the relatives, must divide the belongings of the loved one and see that those left homeless are provided for. Since Cholly has never witnessed the ceremonies surrounding a funeral, he gets an education simultaneous with our witnessing of the

unfolding of a tradition. The ladies of Jimmy's generation take over: they cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody, and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jimmy. They also manage to get clothes for Cholly to attend the funeral, and they ensure that all of his physical needs are met. (Harris 73-4)

Aunt Jimmy's death is an event that Morrison utilizes to display various cultural folk practices. These practices center around Cholly Breedlove because Aunt Jimmy's death is his first experience with death and the customs associated with death. Cholly quickly learns that the family of the deceased receives much attention:

As a member of the family, one of the bereaved, he was the object of a great deal of attention. The ladies had cleaned the house, aired everything out, notified everybody, and stitched together what looked like a white wedding dress for Aunt Jimmy, a maiden lady, to wear when she met Jesus. They even produced a dark suit, white shirt, and tie for Cholly. The husband of one of

them cut his hair. He was enclosed in fastidious tenderness. Nobody talked to him; that is, they treated him like the child he was, never engaging him in serious conversation; but they anticipated wishes he never had: meals appeared, hot water for the wooden tub, clothes laid out. At the wake he was allowed to fall asleep, and arms carried him to bed. Only on the third day after the death--the day of the funeral--did he have to share the spotlight. Aunt Jimmy's people came from nearby towns and farms. Her brother O.V., his children and wife, and lots of cousins. But Cholly was still the major figure, because he was "Jimmy's boy, the last thing she loved," and "the one who found her." The solicitude of the women, the head pats of the men, pleased Cholly, and the creamy conversations fascinated him. (Morrison 111)

Cholly receives a haircut, clothes, and hot meals while he is being treated as a fragile child. His relatives tend to his needs, even carrying him to bed after he falls asleep at Aunt Jimmy's wake. Cholly finds this attention disconcerting because he is normally not treated so

well. Additionally, Cholly learns a tradition:

"None of the kinsmen of the dead should assist in preparing the body for burial" (Puckett 83). Past traditions keep Cholly's involvement with Aunt Jimmy's body and funeral at a minimum. Because traditions of death are so engrained in the characters, each chore involved in the death is handled for the bereaving family. The attention Cholly receives as a surviving relative is only one example of the rituals involving death.

Another example of rituals involving death is the belief that death is imminent for someone who requests black thread. In conversations about Aunt Jimmy's illness and subsequent death, her friends discuss the fact that they should have been aware of her imminent death because she had requested black thread:

Said she wanted me to bring her
some black thread to patch some
things for the boy. I should of
known just for her wanting black
thread that was a sign. (Morrison 111)

These ladies remember another woman who died following her request for black thread. The repetition of the incident has internalized their belief in the ominous sign of requesting black thread. Now firmly believing in the requesting of black thread as a sign of death, these ladies

will pass their belief to following generations who will quote the same idea to their children.

The funeral banquet is another example of a cultural ritual associated with death. Once Aunt Jimmy's funeral ends, her family gathers at her home. Here, the family eats the food her friends have brought in for the grieving family:

The funeral banquet was a peal
of joy after the thunderous beauty
of the funeral. It was like a street
tragedy with spontaneity tucked
softly into the corners of a highly
formal structure. The deceased was
the tragic hero, the survivors the
innocent victims; there was the
omnipresence of the deity, strophe
and antistrophe of the chorus of
mourners led by the preacher. There
was grief over the waste of life,
the stunned wonders at the ways of
God, and the restoration of order
in nature at the graveyard. Thus
the banquet was the exultation, the
harmony, the acceptance of physical
frailty, joy in the termination of
misery. Laughter, relief, a steep

hunger for food. (Morrison 113)

Because friends and family methodically respond when death occurs, their reaction illustrates the traditions and practices involving death have been repeated and their practices internalized by the characters in the novel.

Enjoying the food and companionship of family and friends is another folk practice of death. After Aunt Jimmy's burial and the funeral banquet, her family and friends talk and catch up with the news and events of their lives:

Back in his house, he was free
to join in the gaiety and enjoy
what he really felt--a king of
carnival spirit. He ate greedily
and felt good enough to try to get
to know his cousins. There was some
question, according to the adults, as
to whether they were his real cousins
or not, since Jimmy's brother O.V. was
only a half-brother, and Cholly's
mother had been the daughter of Jimmy's
sister, but that sister was from the
second marriage of Jimmy's father, and
O.V. was from the first marriage.

(Morrison 113)

Not only does the family gather to bury their loved one, but they also gather to catch up with news. A death brings together relatives who otherwise never keep in contact. This gathering of a family offers a social intercourse not normally experienced by Black culture. Puckett explains:

For instance the chief recreations of the natives of Angola are marriages and funerals. The African is intensely social and occasions of this sort as well as palavers, secret societies and other meetings offer a chance for gathering together in crowds and making an inconceivable hubbub, which to them is as much self-gratification as self-perpetuation or any other basic societal activity. Precisely the same thing holds true with the rural Southern Negro, as with other isolated folk, who have but little social intercourse. (Puckett 77)

The members of Aunt Jimmy's family take advantage of their loss through the sharing of conversation. Because family gatherings occur so rarely, this tradition of socializing begins the healing process that permits the survivors to continue with their lives.

Traditions not only carry Aunt Jimmy's family through

the shock of her death, her funeral preparations, and the family banquet but also through the tradition of cleaning Aunt Jimmy's home. The day after the funeral, Aunt Jimmy's relatives begin cleaning her home, taking care of her business, and distributing her possessions among themselves.

Morrison comments:

The next day was cleaning-out day,
settling accounts, distributing Aunt
Jimmy's goods. Mouths were set in
downward crescents, eyes veiled, feet
tentative. (Morrison 119)

Because Cholly is unaware of the business to take care of, he follows orders given to him by other family members. These orders lack the warmth displayed by the adults for Cholly only yesterday: "All the glamour and warmth the adults had given him on the previous day were replaced by a sharpness that agreed with his mood" (Morrison 119). The adults go through Aunt Jimmy's belongings and sort them as to their condition. Upon the completion of this task, the goods are divided among the adults. Once the work is completed, everyone prepares to go home:

The day Cholly's uncle was ready to
leave, when everything was packed, when
the quarrels about who gets what had
seethed down to a sticking gravy on

everybody's tongues, . . . (Morrison 119-20)

After the details surrounding Aunt Jimmy's death are taken care of, everyone returns to his home to resume his life. This is the final ritual Morrison's characters employ after the death of Aunt Jimmy.

The traditions surrounding death are numerous in the novel The Bluest Eye. Toni Morrison demonstrates the internalization of the traditions through the actions of her characters and through Cholly's first experience with death. Morrison explains folk rituals involving death and shows how these rituals are perpetuated by the characters of The Bluest Eye.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The folk traditions included in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye confirm the definitions of Franz Boas and Harold Courlander. The characters in the novel live the folk traditions established by their ancestors. As the characters follow these traditions, they perpetuate the beliefs and practices of their family through Boas' idea of transmission. Aurelio Espinosa states in Funk and Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend that folklore is the accumulated store of what mankind has experienced, learned, and practiced across the ages. He further states that folklore may be said to be a true and direct expression of primitive man. The accumulated store of the experiences of the characters in this novel divulges much about the life and culture of this particular group of people and their individual families and homes. By studying their beliefs and daily habits, much of their folk history is revealed. Through this revelation, an understanding of their actions and reactions to events is obtained. As the characters experience family unity, follow religious habits, sing songs, bury their dead, enjoy music, and practice medicine, their actions record the results of the

internalization of folk traditions and demonstrate how the characters' rememory enables them to perpetuate traditions begun many years before.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Abrahams, Roger D. Deep Down in the Jungle. Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1970.
- Bakerman, Jane S. "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison." American Literature. 52.4 (1981): 541-63.
- Brewer, John Mason. American Negro Folklore. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972.
- Byerman, Keith E. "Intense Behavior: The Use of the Grotesque in The Bluest Eye and Eva's Man." CLA Journal 25.4 (1982): 447-57.
- Courlander, Harold. A Treasury of African-American Folklore. New York: Crown Publishers, 1976.
- Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." Contemporary Literature. 23.3 (1982): 323-42.
- DeWeever, Jacqueline. "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Sula." CLA Journal. 22.4 (1979): 402-414.
- Edelberg, Cynthia Dubin. "Morrison's Voices: Formal Education, the Work Ethic, and the Bible." American Literature. 58.2 (1986): 217-37.
- Harris, Trudier. "Reconnecting Fragments: Afro-American

Folk Tradition in The Bluest Eye." Critical Essays on Toni Morrison. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay. Boston: G.K. Hall, 1988.

Hovet, Grace Ann and Barbara Lounsberry. "Flying as Symbol and Legend in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, Sula, and Song of Solomon." CLA Journal 27.2 (1983): 119-40.

Jackson, Bruce. "The Other Kind of Doctor: Conjure and Magic in Black American Folk Medicine." American Folk Medicine A Symposium. Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.

Klotman, Phyllis R. "Dick-and-Jane and the Shirley Temple Sensibility in The Bluest Eye." Black American Literature Forum 13.4 (1979): 123-33.

Lange, Bonnie Shipman. "Toni Morrison's Rainbow Code." Critique 24 (1983): 173-81.

Levine, Laurence. Black Culture and Black Consciousness. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977.

May, Hal, and James G. Lesniak, eds. Contemporary Authors Vol. 27. Detroit: Gale Rsearch, 1989.

Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Washington Square P, 1970.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Order and Disorder in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye." Critique 19.1 (1977): 112-20.

- Puckett, Newbell Niles. Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1926.
- Rosenberg, Ruth. "Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in The Bluest Eye." Black American Literature Forum 21.4 (1987): 435-45.
- Rushdy, Ashraf H. A. "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels." Contemporary Literature 31.3 (1990): 300-23.
- Sale, John B. The Tree Named John. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1929.
- Samuels, Wilfred D. and Clenora Hudson-Weems. Toni Morrison. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990.
- Wilcots, Barbara J. True and Ancient Properties: Naming and Spirits in the Novels of Toni Morrison. Thesis, Texas Woman's U, 1989. Denton: privately published, 1989.