

Common racial themes shared in faulkner and morrison



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Common Racial Themes Shared in Faulkner and Morrison

In spite of obvious racial and gender differences between William Faulkner (1897-1962) and Toni Morrison (1931-present), both authors approach race as a means of social separation. American society throughout history has focused on such separations to establish a defined hierarchy, based both on race and gender. In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, race is used to demean black Americans; standards of beauty were based on what appeared to be the closest in resemblance to white Americans. Traditionally African features such as broad noses and full lips were deemed unattractive and therefore socially inferior, as evidenced by *The Bluest Eye*'s protagonists with the fair-skinned Maureen Peal. William Faulkner's *Light in August* approaches race as a means of gendered power. Faulkner's works showcase the ambiguity in gender lines, and *Light in August* is no different. Miscegenation, a central topic, melds with gender differences in empowering white characters as masculine and black characters as neutered. Joe Christmas, a character whose racial background is shrouded throughout most of the novel, is constantly berated and indirectly belittled by powerful white figures such as his stepfather and a later lover. His death, presented at the apex of the novel (also coinciding with verification of his mixed-race background), is most significant in its portrayal of Joe Christmas' castration and murder at the hands of authorities.

The Bluest Eye

Morrison's portrayal of race touches on several important points reflecting the social climate of the time. First, being white is aesthetically more

desirable than being black. Second, being black equivocates to hardship, and third, being white transcends all aspects of being black in the social hierarchy.

Race and Ethnicity

Claudia and Frieda encounter the phenomena of racial aesthetics with the introduction of Maureen Peal, a fair-complexioned black girl who, despite being born with an unusual amount of birth defects, is preferred by the black boys and girls. Maureen is born with six fingers on each hand with slightly noticeable stumps where her extra fingers used to be, a significant mutation and something that would erstwhile earn her the cruel taunting of most all the children had it not been for her fair skin (Morrison 63). More noticeable is the contempt Maureen garners from Claudia and Frieda, who take closer notice to her dog tooth, relishing what physical imperfections they can find (Morrison 63). If anything, the girls' spite is a jealousy harboured because they too desire to be as light-skinned and supposedly beautiful as Maureen. Further accentuating the social favour of white aesthetic superiority, Maureen denigrates Claudia, Frieda and Pecola, screaming that she is cute [and they are] black and ugly black e mos [sic], presumably differentiating herself from the three by pointing out her fairness in comparison to theirs (Morrison 73).

Identity

Other forms of childhood naïveté serve to further Morrison's grim portrayal of black race as being synonymous with a life of hardship and inferiority.

Introducing Pecola in a narrative from Claudia's perspective, Morrison
<https://assignbuster.com/common-racial-themes-shared-in-faulkner-and-morrison/>

demonstrates the perversion of a black society that would, in a blue-eyed Baby Doll, personify what adults assume to be a child's fondest wish (Morrison 20). Still worse is the infuriating tone Morrison evokes in her three protagonists upon Mrs. Breedlove's interaction with a white girl smaller and younger than them who refers to their revered matriarch as simply Polly; told from Claudia's point of view, what infuriates the protagonists and the reader is that not even the elder Pecola refers to Mrs. Breedlove by her first name (Morrison 108). Still more self-deprecating is Claudia's implied realisation that she is at the bottom of the social chain. Stuck below her mother in age and black men in gender, she is further demeaned when she realises the white girl's transcendence of the black social order altogether. As a young, black woman, Claudia sees how inferior even her own people perceive her.

A Light in August

Identity

Unlike Morrison, Faulkner uses race as a means of sexual empowerment. For example, Joe's feelings of self-hatred as a man of colour is reflected in his beating of the shenegro in the barn, a means of projection against the demons he faces as an adopted boy (Faulkner 514). As a black man, Christmas further feels inadequate and filled with self-deprecation. He is demeaned into emasculation under the sexually charged Miss Burden, a reflection of black inferiority to the white race in all interactions. Christmas' emasculation is complete in his murder at the hands of Grimm, who shoots Christmas five times and then castrates him in a kitchen, a symbol of the relegation of blacks into servitude and powerlessness. Faulkner's inherent

message is that to be black is to be not only socially inferior, but to also be genderless and dehumanized, a fact evidenced by his most gruesome and torturous death. Though Joe Christmas is not noticeably black as a product of miscegenation, he is forced into a black identity by a society who will not accept a white man with even a drop of black blood in his lineage.

Race and Ethnicity

Morrison and Faulkner both draw upon the inequities of American racial relations in order to communicate his disdain for the institution of racial discrimination. However, Faulkner is more fatalist in tone, evoking a manner of apathy and helplessness at the situation. Like Morrison, Faulkner demonstrates how racial association compromises character. Reverend Gail Hightower is shamed in society initially because of his wife's infidelities; however, what ostracizes him from the white community is a contemptuous rumour that he, as a reverend, had an affair with a black woman. People who wished to distance themselves from Hightower could not do so simply with the knowledge that he was a cuckold; instead, a far more negative rumour involving sexual relations and possible miscegenation was spread. Faulkner further shows the power of racial separation in the indictment of Joe Christmas by Joe Brown, who is questioned by Hightower and the sheriff. Unable to sway them from assuming his guilt at the murder of Miss Burden, Brown spitefully accuses the two of [accusing] the white man trying to help [them] and letting the nigger run (Faulkner 470).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

<https://assignbuster.com/common-racial-themes-shared-in-faulkner-and-morrison/>

Faulkner, William. *Novels 1930-1935: As I Lay Dying, Sanctuary, Light in August, Pylon*. New York: The Library of America, 1985.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000.