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# THE ADOLESCENT COMPLEXITIES OF RACE, GENDER, AND CLASS IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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**Abstract**: The examination argues that out of Toni Morrison's first three novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye* is the most qualified as a work of adolescent literature that discusses how race, gender and class affects the young, black female despite its "adult" content. Pecola Breedlove seeks a nurturing relationship in an adult world of white, assimilationist attitudes but only finds rejection and misery because of her particular racial, gender and class status. This rejection ultimately silences Pecola, destroys her state of child-like innocence (accentuated by her passionate desire for blue eyes), and forces her into the harsh realities of the adult world while retaining the mental thoughts of a child. The examination uses specific moments from the text that highlight race, gender and class attitudes from various adults to demonstrate that the path to adulthood for the adolescent is especially treacherous for the young, black female. Although Morrison's work is one dealing with the tragic circumstances in a adolescent females life that severely scars her for the rest of her life, *The Bluest* Eye also contains the story of the young black female Claudia and her sister Freida who are able to overcome the oppressive attitudes of the adult world and find their own subjective voices. Claudia's voice is the one that implicates not only the adult community but also her and her sister in Pecola's mental destruction. This presentation of a young person's life argues for *The Bluest Eye*'s inclusion on an adolescent reading list.

**Keywords:** race, gender, class, adolescent, literature, adolescent development, intra-racism, assimilation

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*So it was with confidence, strengthened by pity and pride, that we decided to change the course of events and alter a human life.*
(Claudia MacTeer, *The Bluest Eye*)

Claudia MacTeer's particular childhood memory marks a moment in which all the complexities of her own adolescent experiences, along with those of her sister, Freida become insignificant as they strive to save, or at least redeem, the lives of Pecola Breedlove and her unborn child. The sisters feel that they are the only ones who can save them from an adult community that is "disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, [and] even excited" (Morrison, 1970/1994:190) over the fact that Pecola had been raped and impregnated by her father Cholly. Where the community saw a young and helpless target for their self-righteous condemnation, the sisters saw a young and helpless victim of undeserved censure from an adult world. Claudia specifically "felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live" (p. 190) since the adults cannot or will not consider the circumstances that lead up to the moment Pecola's innocence is destroyed. Claudia's and Freida's plan for saving Pecola does not involve direct intervention but rather the indirect action of planting flower seeds in their backyard. They feel that if the seeds bloom, then everything will turn out fine and Pecola's baby will live. Unfortunately, "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (Prologue, para. 1) and Pecola's baby dies shortly after birth. The baby's death, as Laurie Vickroy (1996) points out, symbolizes "the ultimate loss of the future" (p. 101), and indeed, Pecola's future is lost in a rapid descent into madness. The last impression the sisters have of Pecola is that:

> [t]he damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see— but which filled the valleys of her mind. (p. 204)

Just like a young bird who has wings but is physically grounded and cannot use them to escape the restrictions of the nest and fly into a new world, Pecola becomes mentally grounded in the experiences of a degenerative childhood, and she never leaves adolescence.

Because Toni Morrison's first novel centers on the tragic life of a young, black girl, *The Bluest Eye* can be considered a significant work in the genre of adolescent literature. Understanding the value of defining the work as an adolescent novel is accomplished through examining the complexities that arise with the introduction of race, gender, and class to Pecola's childhood. Morrison's utilization of triads is especially helpful in this examination since *The Bluest Eye*

itself belongs to the triad of her first three novels that contain adolescent moments which includes *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. Additionally, there are a number of textual moments in *The Bluest Eye* where the adolescent lives of Pecola, Claudia and Frieda intersect and the three young girls form a triad in order to react to a particular situation they find themselves experiencing. However, the most important triad in *The Bluest Eye* contains the issues of race, gender and class. It is through these three issues, governed by the adult community's attitudes toward them, that Pecola experiences her loss of adolescent innocence.

The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate, through a brief textual explication, how *The Bluest Eye* is the most qualified of Morrison's first three novels to be called a work of adolescent literature that intertwines the difficulties associated with adolescent self-definition in terms of race, gender and class. A similarity found in Morrison's first three novels is that the protagonists' lives are initially influenced by relationships formed with others during their adolescence. Pecola momentarily finds the comfort and security of a nurturing relationship in an adult world of negative racist, sexist, and assimilationist attitudes when she meets Claudia and Freida. Nel Wright, in *Sula*, eventually discovers, albeit as an adult, that female friendship and female subjectivity are powerful and effective correctives to the self-serving demands of a black community when she, as a young girl, meets the unpredictable and headstrong Sula Peace. Finally, Milkman's journey towards and arrival at the importance of racial heritage, and not middle class values, in the establishment of an individual's true identity begins when he, as a young boy, first meets his lifelong friend, Guitar. However, what distinguishes *The Bluest Eye* from *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* is the way its focus *remains* on the adolescent experience. Jan Furman (1996) states that "*The Bluest Eye* directs a critical gaze at the process and symbols of imprinting the self during childhood and at what happens to the self when the process is askew and the symbols are defective" (p. 12). She adds that while "Claudia and her sister traverse Morrison's landscape of black girlhood" (p. 20), they reveal the tragic circumstances that destroy the innocence of another black girl.

Even though it is Claudia's *adult* voice that reflects back on the events that affect her sister and Pecola at particular moments in their young lives, it never intrudes in the novel to the degree that it becomes more important than her adolescent voice. It should be noted that Doreatha Mbalia (1991) views the issue of voice as problematic in *The Bluest Eye* as she identifies Claudia the child, Claudia the adult, and an omniscient narrator as the voices that tell the story. However, she feels these voices are inconsistent and intrusive upon one another at various places in the text. Although structurally this may be the case, it is still important to remember that Morrison's emphasis is on the voices of adolescent black girls growing up in a hostile adult environment. While *The Bluest Eye* highlights these particular voices, Nel's and Milkman's young voices eventually give way to adult voices that deal with adult concerns. Their respective voices lose the tones of inquiring and rebellious innocence and become the more strident voices of disillusioned adults. In fact, in *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia's adult voice establishes

the distinction between the adult world and the adolescent world. As she looks back on her relationship with adults she remembers that "[a]dults [did] not talk to us—they [gave] us directions. They [issued] orders without providing information" (Morrison, 1970/1994:10). Adolescents, in Morrison's novel, are talked *about* but are never talked *to* by the adult characters (Bouson, 2000:32).

Morrison introduces Claudia's, and Pecola's, childhood stories with the revision of a popular childhood Dick-and-Jane story. It is the story of "Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane [who] live in the green-and-white house" (Preface, para. 1) along with a cat and a dog. The family is a very normal one where the father is big and strong, the mother is nice, and everyone is extremely happy. Morrison repeats the description of this happy family three times, but each time after the first she takes care to gradually remove grammatical indications of normalcy like punctuation, capitalization and even spacing between words so that by the third repetition, there is a chaotic, fragmented, and incomprehensible image of this happy family. This disruption parallels the chaos and fragmentation of the Breedloves when they are compared to other black families like the MacTeers or a white family like the Fishers who employs Pauline Breedlove. Morrison reinforces this fragmentation at the beginning of chapters that deal directly with Pecola and her family with excerpts from the corrupted story. The story's corruption is based on the idea that the childhood fable does not exist within the context of an adolescent's imagination of what growing up should be like but rather within an adolescent's imagination negatively influenced by an adult world of racial, gender, and class politics.

To begin with, Pecola's adolescent experience with the issue of race takes place within a community that has internalized the dominant culture's racist ideas of a superior goodness associated with "whiteness" and a physical and mental ugliness associated with "blackness" (Kubitschek, 1998:27,40). In the "Afterword" to her novel, Morrison reveals that she uses racist ideology to focus "on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (p. 211). In "African American Identity Formation: A Review of the Literature," by Janeula M. Burt and Glennelle Halpin (1998), they note that "[d]uring adolescence problems of coherence, continuity, meaningfulness, and self-definition may, and frequently do, take precedence in individual awareness" (3). They cite S. T. Hauser and E. Kasendorf (1983) to point out that during this formative moment in an adolescent's life, "correspondences between childhood expectations and envisioned adulthood are sought and frequently not found" (3). In Pecola's case, her vulnerable position as an adolescent, black female makes her quest for self-definition especially crucial but when she turns to her parents in order to establish a positive link between childhood and adulthood, she only finds an overwhelming source of racial self-hatred. Thus, Pecola's misery over her "blackness," and thus her ugliness, originates in her family's perception of themselves. Morrison writes that:

> [I]t was as though some mysterious and all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted without question. They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (p. 39)

Vickroy (1996) states that because Pecola's parents were "[t]raumatized children themselves, they continue the trauma by denying their own weakness in their abuse of parental power, by instilling their own fears of impotence, and by calling upon their children to fulfill their own unmet needs" (p. 93). A particularly cruel form of this parental abuse is the passing down of their racial self-hatred to the extremely vulnerable Pecola. The result is that she is unable to develop any type of racial consciousness that could counteract the degrading influence of a dominant and racist society. For example, when she interacts with one of the few white characters in the novel, the storeowner Mr. Yacobowski, Pecola is very conscious of the meaning behind his dismissive behavior towards her as she is trying to purchase her beloved Mary Jane candy. She knows her "blackness" is responsible for the "disgust, even anger in [the] grown male's eyes" (Morrison, 1970/1994:49).

Morrison originates Pecola's racial self-loathing (represented by her fervent desire for blue eyes) in her parents, but she also presents a complete antithesis to Pecola's self denying racial identity in the form of Maureen Peal. Described as a "high yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (p. 62), Maureen captivates the adults and humbles the other children her age when she and her family move into the black community. Claudia cannot help but notice that "[s]he enchanted the entire school" (p. 62), and both she and Freida were "bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her" (p. 63). These various emotions prompt the MacTeer sisters to closely examine Maureen in order to understand why she was someone the black community adored when they were practically invisible to this same community. The sisters' scrutiny of the idea of "whiteness" embodied in Maureen demonstrates how a critically inquiring nature is essential to the positive identity development of a black adolescent female. As the MacTeer sisters examine Maureen in order to find "flaws to restore [their] equilibrium" (p. 63), they are initially content "with uglying up her name, [by] changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie" (p. 63), but later they discover that Maureen has a dogtooth which further devalues her "whiteness." They also discover that she had been born with six fingers on each hand, but this condition had been surgically corrected. These two revelations of physical deformity lead the sisters to Christen Maureen "[S]ix-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (p.63), and in doing so, they acquire a means of critiquing this "perfect" image of "whiteness." However, unlike the MacTeer sisters, Pecola is not mentally conditioned to recognize and articulate the idea that "whiteness" has its flaws. Instead, she stands in awe of Maureen meekly accepts her aide at school one day when Maureen

rescues her from a group of boys who are taunting her about her "blackness." Pecola further defers to Maureen as she questions Pecola about her home life and offers no opposition to Maureen's sexually suggestive conclusions when the issue of her father's nakedness becomes the topic of conversation. When Claudia, who is a witness to both the "rescue" and the inquisition, has finally had enough of Maureen's questioning haughtiness, she demands that Maureen stop badgering Pecola. Maureen responds to Claudia's interceding on Pecola's part by insulting both the MacTeer sisters and Pecola when she tells them that "[I] *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute" (p. 73). While Pecola accepts the insult by "[folding] into herself, like a pleated twig" (p. 73), the MacTeer sisters repay the insult in kind as they shout "six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" at Maureen's rapidly retreating figure.

Pecola's, Claudia's and Freida's interaction with Maureen present two diametrically opposed means of constructing a racial identity. For a young, black female like Pecola growing up in a black community that idolizes everything Maureen represents, she believes the only recourses left for her is to first accept the community's racial preference and then withdraw into an isolated community of the self. However, even as Morrison reveals the mental devastation intra-racism can cause to an adolescent mind, she also presents a remedy to that intra-racism in the form of the MacTeer sisters who confront and challenge the assumed superiority of "whiteness."

Not only must Pecola contend with a communal attitude towards a preferential racial identity that ignores the beauty of her "blackness," she must also endure the adult community's attitude toward gender. Relying on their adolescent innocence, both Pecola and the MacTeer sisters place faith in the idea that "womanhood" is defined by the start of the menstrual cycle, and Pecola actually begins her's when she comes to stay with the MacTeers after Cholly burns them out of their home. From the young girls' perspectives, a significant part of Pecola's newly acquired female maturity is the ability to have a baby, but as Freida points out that can only happen when someone loves you. Pecola's response to Freida's revelation is the most important question Morrison posits in this text concerning the life of a young, black girl growing up in a cold and disdainful adult world: "[H]ow do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you" (p. 32).

Before her arrival into "womanhood," Pecola is actually presented with an answer to her question, although it is a negative one, when she is befriended by a trio of prostitutes who live in an apartment above the Breedlove's storefront dwelling. China, Poland, and Miss Marie (called the Maginot Line by Claudia and her sister) never provide Pecola with any direct answers when she asks them what they do for a living, but they do give her an adult female perspective on the issues of love and gender politics. Morrison writes that "[e]xcept for Marie's fabled love of Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination" (p. 56), and their hatred extended to those women who "deceived their husbands" (p. 56). The only type of women they respect are those women the

prostitutes described as "'Good Christian colored women'" (p. 56). The prostitutes attempt to instill the belief in Pecola that there was no such thing as genuine love between a man and a woman. They also cannot provide Pecola with any positive advice about growing up as a black female because of the misery of their own adolescence. Morrison writes that

> they looked back on their own youth as a period of ignorance, and regretted that they had not made more of it. They were not young girls in whores' clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores' clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. (p. 56-57)

Furman (1996) states that "Pecola loves these women, and they are more than willing to share the lessons they've learned, but their lessons are wrong for Pecola . . . [T]hey cannot teach her what she wants most to know: how to be loved by a mother and father, by a community, and by a society" (p. 21-22). Additionally, the "sisterly" bond that the prostitutes share is very similar to the sisterly bond between Claudia and Freida, and in both cases, this bond is vital in how these adult women and adolescent girls cope with the exploitive nature of gender politics. Even though these bonds include Pecola at various moments, they do not prevent Pecola's loss of adolescent innocence nor inspire a positive movement towards adulthood.

Perhaps the most damaging relationship in terms of gender in *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola's relationship with her mother. Besides Pauline's contribution to the Pecola's belief in racial self-hatred, she also contributes to Pecola's negative self-image concerning her gender. Pauline's internalization of the idea that the black female is at the very bottom of a social hierarchy, both within the black community and the dominant community as well causes her to withhold any nurturing love from her family, and especially Pecola, the only other female member. Instead, any and all the nurturing love she is capable of showing is directed towards the white family whom she works for as a maid and cook. While in the Fisher household "[s]he represents a self that exudes nothing but mania for all that is white, and a lovelessness for everything that is her own" (Kulkarni, 1993:2). At home her energies are directed towards her fervent religious life, her domineering and cold attitude towards her children, and her constant desire to mentally and physically battle Cholly in order to convince him that he is a sinner whose soul cannot be redeemed. Pauline's relationship with Pecola is especially tragic because it is a situation in which a mother and daughter exist in a patriarchal and racist environment which does not allow them the chance to construct a positive and subjective identity. However, instead of relaying on each other as a source of strenght, Pauline looks at her daughter and is reminded of the "blackness" that consumes her existence while Pecola looks at Pauline and does not see "Mother" but rather a stranger named "Mrs. Breedlove." Similar to her relationship with the prostitutes, Pecola's relationship with her mother does not provide her with any positive means of becoming a strong, self-loving, and subjective adult female.

As if the negative communal attitudes of race and gender were not detrimental enough to her childhood, Pecola must also face the cruel and exclusionary class-consciousness from certain members of the black community. Mbalia (1991) suggests that although Morrison's interpretation of class is in its infant stages when she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, she is "at least conscious of a limited role that economics play in the exploitation of African people" (p. 29). This economic exploitation helps to perpetuate the racist ideology that gives the dominant culture its power to oppress those who can be classified as the Other. According to Nancy Backes (2001), when black girls are classified as the Other, they experience a "geologic fault between childhood and adulthood" (p. 147). As with the formation of her racial identity, Pecola's classification as the Other in terms of class begins with her family. The Breedloves' poverty is "traditional and stultifying," but "it was not unique" (Morrison, 1970/1994:38) for the surrounding black community. However, what makes Pecola's poverty significant is when she encounters other members of the black community who have given in to the middle-class values of the dominant society. Morrison describes these certain members as slim, brown girls from "Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian" (p. 81) who have attended college and have learned how to rid themselves of the "funkiness" of black life. Geraldine is one of these women, and her encounter with Pecola provides yet another moment in Pecola's adolescence where a member of the adult world severely damages her fragile psyche.

Geraldine meets Pecola when her son Junior tricks Pecola into her home. As Geraldine inventories the young girl's slovenly appearance, she quickly surmises that:

> [S]he had seen this little girl all her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "Shet up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. (p. 91-92)

Standing before her in her middle class home is one of those girls who is most clearly a helpless victim of racism, sexism, and classism. However, like her reaction to the other adolescent black girls she has seen in the past, Geraldine exhibits no sympathy for Pecola because she is immediately reminded of "everything she has sought to escape—everything associated with the poor, struggling African masses: their physical appearance, their behavioral patterns, their lifestyles, and the speech patterns" (Mbalia, 1991:31). Instead of offering her kind words, Geraldine calls Pecola a "nasty little black bitch" (Morrison, 1970/1994:92) and orders her out of her house. It is interesting to note that

Geraldine's treatment of Pecola reveals the intense, adult self-interest of class concerns which also affects her own son. She constantly drives the idea into Junior's young mind that "[c]olored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (p. 87) and as a result, his adolescent life is one of isolation and loneliness. He attempts to alleviate these two conditions through sadistic behavior towards others his own age. Geraldine exposes the impressionable young minds of Junior and Pecolat racis, and in this case class -conscious assumptions, this exposure affect on the way they view themselves and the world around them.

The above discussion of race, gender and class is a mere introduction to the significant complexities of all three issues and their affect on Pecola as Morrison presents them in *The Bluest Eye*. However, their introduction, as alluded to earlier, emphasizes that *The Bluest Eye* is a significant work in the body of adolescent literature because it provides an unvarnished and un-romanticized view of race, gender and class for young readers. In fact, Vickroy (1996) and Bouson (2000), focus on the psychology of the traumatized adolescent as they discuss Morrison's text in order to reveal how negative racial and gender attitudes that originate in the adult world adversely affect the adolescent mind. Morrison, through Pecola, argues that while the young girl may have a partial understanding of what it is to be black in a white, dominant society, when her struggle to deal with her "blackness" also becomes a struggle to deal with gender and class inequity, she is unable to understand, yet alone articulate, what it means to be all three, black, female and poor. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola does not have a voice because she has not been taught the language of resistance (Backes, 2001) which interrogates and critiques destructive ideas that originate in the adult world. In their discussion of ways to develop the critical reading skills of adolescents through adolescent literature, Thomas W. Bean and Karen Moni (2003) introduce the idea of Critical Discourse Analysis (N. Fairclough, 1989) as a way of discussing an adolescent text. This type of approach "assumes that social conditions, particularly conditions of unequal power relationships, determine the properties of discourse" (p. 643). It is not difficult to see that Critical Discourse Analysis is an idea way of reading *The Bluest Eye* as an adolescent novel given that Pecola's voice is the most important part of her journey into adulthood yet it is powerless in the context of the adult world.

If *The Bluest Eye* is placed against a traditional theme found in adolescent literature, the bildungsroman, it is definitely identified as an anti-coming of age novel "whose project is to dismantle the hegemonic norm of identity acquired though mimicry" (Grewal, 1998:23). Its narrative strategy involves a movement away from the idea of a young character experiencing a symbolic journey or a series of adventures in order to gain a better understanding of the adult world and in return, gaining a matured consciousness. Instead, its narrative purpose is grounded in both the portrayal of a young life destroyed by an un-nurturing adult world and in the critique of that adult world which forces all the negative implications of racial, gender, and class bias on its children. While Morrison accomplishes the first through Pecola, she effectively offers the second through

Claudia. As Backes (2001) states:

> [L]ike a child discovering the reassuring cohesiveness of a mirrored reflection, Claudia as a child experiences a sense of wholeness and internal compatibility, a relative lack of othering at the personal level. She learns and keeps the language of resistance. Finally, in relating the story to us, she has the words that bear witness, words that fail Pecola, who lapses into a silent, private, and internal conversation . . . The story Claudia tells is her foray against silence and invisibility, at the same time that it discusses the ineradicability of those conditions for most, including Pecola. (p. 152-153)

Besides her vocal critique, Claudia physically critiques the adult world through her destruction of a white baby doll she receives for Christmas. Claudia reveals that she could not love the white baby doll "[b]ut I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (Morrison, 1970/1994:21). This examination includes completely dismantling the doll and sifting through the plastic and sawdust until she found the source of its voice, a "mere metal roundness" (p. 21). The plastic, sawdust and metal used to create the white doll symbolizes the artificiality found in the construction of not only racial but also gender and class identities. Claudia's discovery exposes the insubstantial nature yet affective influence these socially constructed identities have on the life of young, black girls.

Although published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* is a novel that deserves a prominent place on any contemporary adolescent reading list because of its relevancy to current perspectives on race, gender, and class. Even though it can be argued that Morrison's first novel along with the other two novels in her adolescent triad are more "adult" oriented novels due to their graphic language and sexual content, at least in the case of *The Bluest* Eye, the language and sexuality lend themselves to the novel's most important purpose, the portrayal of a young life lost because of a community's refusal to nurture, protect, and guide it. Morrison's novel is a "classic" example of David Van Biema's observation that leaving adolescence and heading to adulthood is a significant journey that could easily fail without community involvement and could lead to "ostracism, insanity, or profound sorrow" (Nilsen and Donelson, 2001, p. 3). Claudia articulates this result when she blames herself, her sister and the community for Pecola Breedlove's mental and physical destruction:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Here inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dream we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (Morrison,

1970/1994:205).

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