Heroines: black skin, blue Eyes and muslin

Becky Hall

Becky Hall reflects on literary heroines, race and identification.

Courage, suffering, passion, loneliness, resilience, hunger, disappointment, difference. These are the words that spring to mind when I think of the literary heroines of my imagination. Jane Eyre, Maggie Tulliver, Margaret Hale, Tess Durbeyfield, Catherine Earnshaw, Elizabeth Bennet. When I dress myself up as the heroine of my own narrative it is always in the borrowed language of literature. It is always with a particular framework of reference. To speak of myself is often to echo the familiar stories etched into my imagination, the stories which have made it a comforting place to inhabit. It is almost impossible to revisit the psychic worlds of my most adored heroines without producing at the same moment the whisper of muslins, pale silks, organza petticoats, Indian shawls and the spectre of a Darcy, a Heathcliff or a Rochester, for until the more recent arrival of Peter Hoeg's Miss Smilla, my sites of heroic identification have been caught up with my own troubled romance with the literature of nineteenth century England.

Wedged into a small, private corner of my memory there is an image of a little girl with brown skin and horribly short curls. She is secretly studying a bright illustration to a fairy tale, Snow White and Rose Red. She is anxious and furious and quietly ashamed. Waged in an unforgiving war she is desperately trying to decide which of the two little girls is prettier, which looks more like herself. Only one of the sisters can be the heroine; there is after all only one Prince Charming.
Soundings

Fear of discovery heightens the urgency behind the decision. A flood of shame as she watches herself gripped by her preoccupation. She grimly settles for the ebony hair and crimson lips of Rose Red. There is a momentary glimpse of triumph at having the courage to reject this particular fantasy of femininity - the flaxen locks, peachy mouth and blue, blue eyes that constitute the unbearable desirability of Snow White. Yet it is with a deep sense of resignation and disbelief and insurmountable rage that she quietly slips the book back into its place and climbs up the stairs heavy with the awful knowledge that in the social world she inhabits she will never look like she does in her dreams.

Romantic love and physical beauty - 'probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought'. Perhaps nobody looks like their heroines. Perhaps the most wonderful thing about the imagination is that we can shake off the physical, social and cultural limits of our own bodies and travel the unknown shores of others. But as I write this I am reminded of Frantz Fanon's poignant essay The Fact of Blackness, in which he speaks of the 'dark and unarguable' visibility of colour inscribed upon the body. Black skin as the signifier that is seen and 'read' as racial difference. And I am reminded of Pecola Breedlove, the little black girl of Toni Morrison's first novel who prays for nothing more than a pair of new, blue eyes.

'Look a Negro!...Mamma, see the Negro!' (Fanon, p 112). The moment Fanon describes is that in which he confronts the image of his own blackness through the frightened eyes of a child. 'I am overdetermined from without' he writes, 'the slave... of my own appearance'(p 116). Fanon imagines the sight of his own blackness to materialise out of the system of representation governing the colonial imagination. The image of the Negro 'battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave ships'(p 112). Pecola Breedlove wears her ugliness with a devastating conviction. The world around her offers nothing to contradict the 'knowledge' that she is only what she sees herself to be in the eyes of other people, a poor, black, ugly little girl. She sees the 'vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge', the distaste, the separateness, the 'total absence of human recognition' as a glance hangs suspended before her face (Bluest Eye, p 47). Despite the movement of her mind, Pecola knows her blackness to be 'static

and dread'; like Fanon she is fixed, the slave of her appearance. Pecola's friend Claudia learns that the best place to hide her rage and shame is in fraudulent love. Unable to grasp the nature of the secret magic possessed by little white girls, repulsed by the disinterested nature of her violent dismemberment of blue-eyed, yellow-haired pink-skinned dolls, she learns to worship Shirley Temple. Pecola simply prays for the miracle that will bring her beauty and love. She prays for blue eyes.

Both Fanon and Morrison address the production of visibility as an exercise of power. Each interrogates the cultural systems of representation within which blackness is produced and ‘seen’ and internalised as racial difference. Fanon describes the psychic trauma of recognition, Morrison the devastating paradox of being looked at and yet not seen. The Fact of Blackness and The Bluest Eye are two texts which raise critical questions about the relation of race and desire to the structures of fantasy. Fanon demands that we examine the psychic effects of colonial history. He insists that we think about the power of whiteness in the formation of colonised subjectivities. Morrison writes of a subject crippled by the aching gap between social reality and fantasy. A subject shattered by the limits inscribed upon her body. We leave Pecola lost in the hopeless impossibility of her dreams, intent on the ‘blue void’ which she cannot reach or see, but which fills the valleys of her mind. Both Fanon and Morrison remind us that the desire to inhabit a white body carries with it the long and complex history of race and representation. Their work reminds us that fantasies of whiteness lend a problematic historical inflection to those identifications which cross the material boundaries of skin colour. This is not to invest all race-ed identifications of the imagination with the desire to be white, but to recognise the difficulty of addressing fantasies of racial transgression. Fanon is primarily concerned with the masculine subject of the colonial moment, Morrison writes across the genders and generations of a black ‘community’ in 1940s Ohio. Both writers construct a narrative of black subjectivity which is wrestled out of a dialectic between the body, history, culture and the imagination.

For a moment Beloved exploded the fantasy of myself as a nineteenth century heroine. The novel of slavery, memory and subjectivity hurled a shattering narrative of history into the centre of my imaginary world. There seemed no space in Jane Austen, no voice in George Eliot for the articulation of racial difference. The whiteness of my heroines told a narrative of Englishness which my

mixed-race body could only possess with a deep and unsettling ambivalence, a sense of loss. Discomfort is hard, for it demands interrogation. To re-visit the novels of nineteenth century England with the writing of Toni Morrison in mind was of course a way to imagine that literature differently. My compulsive return to those scenes of Charlotte Bronte's novel in which the snarling, snatching body of Mrs Rochester took shape required the acknowledgement that my pleasure in Jane Eyre's heroic and romantic narrative was troubled by an identification with the inhuman, unspeakable presence of the West Indian heiress. I had to learn to mourn the loss of Bertha Mason, whose language seemed suddenly intelligible to me. It spoke of difference. It spoke of Englishness. It told the narrative of England's colonial history and the systems of representation within which such discourses made themselves meaningful. Beloved made it possible to take my blackness and my Englishness into my imagination. It opened up a way to re-think the pleasures of identification without losing sight of the narratives of history which inform its ambivalence. My heroines remain the same. I still see myself in muslins. I still long for Mr Rochester. But the image of my fantasy has shifted. Fascinated by the materiality of black skin and the discursive production of 'race', it is through my own body that I investigate the fantasies of blackness and whiteness troubling the English cultural imagination that is also my own.
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