

# Acting White in Black Literature

by Gorman Beauchamp

In an earlier time, the 1920s and 30s, the term was “dictie,” in ours “oreo,” the pejorative, almost always negative characterization for a black person (supposedly) trying to be white: dark on the outside, but white inside. Such figures—almost invariably female—appear frequently in the canonical black novel, from Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (1923) to Carl Van Vectan’s *Nigger Heaven* (1926) on, seldom a central character, but always pretentious, inauthentic, unable or unwilling to “keep it real.” Two somewhat more recent works present extreme deployments of the dictie-oreo character, Langston Hughes’ *Not Without Laughter* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

A white-acting character plays an unusually prominent role in *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes’ only novel (1930), but in the end serves, surprisingly, an almost redemptive purpose. The story tells of the adolescence of Sandy Rogers, deserted first by his rolling stone father, then by his mother who goes seeking her ranging husband, and raised by his grandmother Aunt

Hager Williams. (“Aunt Hagar,” Zora Neale Hurston points out in her “Glossary of Harlem Slang,” is a name for the whole “colored” race.) She is a washwoman, poor, hard working, deeply religious, principled, and good-hearted—in short, a cliché, but well drawn for all that. Besides his mother, Aunt Hager has two other daughters, both of whom renounce their mother’s old time Baptist religion. The youngest daughter, fun loving Harriett, rebels in the way one might expect, against her mother’s strictures, ending up (temporarily at least) in the Bottoms in a house of ill repute. The eldest daughter Tempy deviates in the opposite direction, up. Married to a (relatively) wealthy official in the postal service, she has risen above her humble origins and doesn’t want anyone to forget it. Here’s Harriett’s take on her sister:

Just because she’s married a mail-clerk with a little property, she won’t even see her own family anymore. When niggers get up in the world, they act just like white folks.... And Tempy’s that kind of nigger.... I don’t want to be respectable if I have to be stuck up and dicty like Tempy is.

Despite the animosity, Harriett hasn't exaggerated. On Christmas Eve Tempy drops in for one of her few annual visits, to distribute presents, but explains to her mother that she's sorry she couldn't be invited to her house for Christmas dinner as they had other guests coming, Dr. and Mrs. Glenn Mitchell, you know. Tempy has moved up the Protestant ladder from Baptist to Episcopalian and when her mother asks how she likes her new church, "Wonderful!" Tempy replied. "Wonderful! Father Hill is so dignified and the services are absolutely refined! There's never anything niggerish about them." When Tempy had gone, "everybody felt relieved—as though a white person had left the house."

Hughes lays it on pretty thick in the creation of Tempy, making her a caricature rather than a real person, the undiluted essence of the white-acting black person, dictie personified; and as such, a figure of ridicule, to be laughed at for her pretensions to gentility, her deracination, for not being "really black." Her younger sister, by contrast, bad and disreputable by conventional standards, has a good heart, puts on no airs, "keeps it real"—and loves Sandy. This is a familiar duality, the white-acting versus the street, with the author's thumb, as usual, on the scale for Sadie. When Aunt Hager dies, Sandy has no one to take him in but Tempy, and she does, with, at first, the expected results. She buys him new clothes, teaches him table manners, corrects his grammar: "If you are going to live with me," she tells

him, "you'll have to learn to do things right." This recalls poor Huck, having to live all orderly-like with the Widow Douglas, who wanted to "sivilize" him; but Tempy's program of reclamation has a racial purpose. Colored folks, she insisted, ought to "dress like white people, talk like white people, think like white people—and then they would no longer be called 'niggers.'"

These sentiments, especially with this wording, probably seemed as offensive when Hughes wrote them as they do now, but isn't Tempy right in her recipe for making Oreos? And she follows up on her words, discovering his intellectual abilities, supporting him in his studies, encouraging him to think about his future. Sandy feels ambivalent: he appreciates Tempy's care and concern, but the lure of the street remains strong. That evening, one chapter ends, Sandy "didn't finish reading, as he had planned, *Moby Dick*.... Instead, he practiced handling a cue-stick under the tutelage of Buster."

That would be the direction he would have taken—down, into the streets—like the other boys he knew, were it not for the support and encouragement, nagging actually, of Tempy. She remains a comically pretentious figure—no collar greens in her house where all the recipes were from *Ladies Home Journal* and she *never* bought watermelon—but she insists that Sandy be enrolled in the classes in high school that the best students took, where he excels. Her motives for wanting him to be and do something special are not altogether

disinterested, for she hopes he will be a credit to his race, someone, that is, that whites will admire. “She wanted to show her white neighbors a perfect colored boy—and such a boy certainly wouldn’t be a user of slang, a lover of pool halls and non-Episcopalian ways.”

Still, if a bright future lies ahead of him, Tempy, with all her amusing foibles, can claim much of the credit. I say “if,” because nothing like that is certain by the end of the novel. Yet I see *Not Without Laughter* as Langston Hughes’ version of *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, not as closely autobiographical as Joyce’s work, but still a very personal *Bildungsroman* of a young black boy’s pathway to becoming a writer, like his author. In this process his white-acting aunt, against stereotype, proves a positive figure for Sandy.

And so, in a different way, does his other aunt, Harriett. Reclaimed by his mother, living with her in Chicago, working as an elevator operator for a meager wage, Sandy despairs of ever finishing school, so desperately poor are they. Then Sandy sees a poster advertising appearances by “The Princess of the Blues,” Augusta Harrietta Williams, at a theater on State Street. He and his mother go to hear her, are impressed by her showmanship, go back stage to meet her; joyous reunion ensues.

Apparently living with her piano player (without benefit of clergy), she has come a long way from the disreputable Bottoms of her hometown where we saw her last. Still exuberant and fun loving, she proves generous as well

with her new found affluence: appalled to hear that Sandy cannot finish school because of the economic necessity that he spend his days at his mindless dead-end job, she immediately offers to give them the \$14 a week that he makes, scolding her sister for standing in the way of his advancement—and sounding like Tempy with a different idiom: “all us niggers are too far back in this white man’s country to let any brains go to waste.... He’s gotta be what his grandma Hager wanted him to be—able to help the black race. You hear me? Help the whole race.” And she gives him ten dollars for books.

In this denouement Hughes reconciles, in a sense, the two usually opposing forces, acting-white and the street, Tempy and Harriett, both of whom prove significant and necessary support for Sandy to rise above his circumstances and become the admirable and successful person his grandmother ardently hoped he would be—if we can prognosticate.

The relatively benign if amused depiction of his acting-white character in *Not Without Laughter* stands at the polar opposite from the treatment of that type in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970)—a treatment that first interested me in this subject. *The Bluest Eye* is a remarkable book, particularly for a first novel, and impresses with its virtuosity. Much of its merit resides in the depth of understanding that Morrison creates for her motley array of characters, some highly disreputable; the jarring exception is the white-acting black woman.

I do not give her name at first because she first appears only as a generic type—and only in one self-contained chapter, unnecessary to the plot. It's almost as if Morrison *had* to depict this woman, this type whom she clearly loathes, however marginally she figures in the novel's telling.

The chapters in *The Bluest Eye* are not numbered; this one begins with a three-line long “title,” beginning SEETHECATGOESMEOUWMEOW ... and commences, abruptly: “They come from Mobile. Aiken. From Newport News. From Marietta. From Meridian.” The “they” here are the women—later condensed into one woman—who come from good, stable homes, behave themselves, are clean and careful in appearance, and ... well, let me admit right here that no summary of mine—or anyone else's—no matter how detailed can begin to capture the unique rhythm and pulse of these paragraphs which, in a way, read more like poetry than prose, poetry which, famously, it is heresy to paraphrase.

To see how Morrison carefully constructs her picture of these women, ever more remorseless, ever more repellent, one must read entirely the first four or five pages of the chapter. Morrison's characterization builds by increments, from small innocent details, to ever more emphatically alienating features. One example must suffice, a crucial one:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black chil-

dren in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lessons begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding hearts [their childhood homes]: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions.

Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle to the grave. The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair.

And Morrison is just getting started.

She details what kind of housekeepers they are—orderly, obsessive, dust-phobic—what kind of wife—efficient, dependable, detached, orgasmless, more erotically aroused by her cat than her husband—what kind of mother, but here “they” become “she”: “Her name was Geraldine ... [S]he built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, and birthed Louis Junior. Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry.” When he's older she “explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud.” She and he are the former, although she fears he might turn ashy if she did not keep his skin oiled with Jergens Lotion. She won't let him play with the nigger boys

who shout “Fuck you” and roll around in the dirt. Junior comes to hate her, of course, and her cat, which he torments in her absence, the first evidence of his blossoming into a sadistic pedophile. As such he lures Pecola, the fragile, pitiful child at the center of the novel into his house, on the pretense of giving her a kitten. Once in he locks the door, tells her she’s a prisoner who can’t leave; she starts to cry but pets the cat rubbing against her; enraged he seizes the cat and throws it at her head. Just then his mother comes in. “Who is this girl?”

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head ... the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of her shoe. She saw the safety pin holding the hem of the dress up....

She 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 stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes....

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds.... 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 playground, broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you in the street.... The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles. . . Grass wouldn’t grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived....

Like flies they hovered, like flies they settled.  
And this one had settled in her house....

“You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.”

Me thinks the lady doth detest too much. Probably nothing in so brief a compass, in such specificity of loathing detail, has ever surpassed this in expressing withering contempt for the black underclass, a simmering hatred of all their grime and sordor. This might appear only the view of one psychically warped, embittered fictional character; but note that the omniscient narrator, and behind her the author, present Geraldine as a “they,” a type—and what type? The white-acting woman, despicable *because* of that orientation. The negative attitude rebounds, of course, so that the reader is intended to view Geraldine/they with the same contempt that she shows for the Pecolas of the world. Contempt *by* her invites contempt *of* her. The acting-white figures in black literature can be pretentious, obnoxious, repressed, foolish, comical, or any combination of these, but none appears as bloodless and cruel as Morrison’s.

I wonder why. I reiterate that this chapter of *The Bluest Eye* is not integral to the plot: Pecola enters it close to the end, to experience yet one more crushing humiliation, but she has a plentitude of those elsewhere, and it hardly seems necessary to anatomize and excoriate the Geraldines of the world at great length and in such detail to do so. It is a case of the tail wagging the cat.

The *dramatis personae* of *The Bluest Eye* is not composed of saints, but flawed and wounded characters toward whom Morrison extends sympathetic understanding. Even Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father, who rapes and impregnates the pitiful abused girl, receives a kind of absolution from the narrator and presumably the author. "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." Incestuous rape may be forgivable (apparently), if done out of "love"; acting-white, at least as Geraldine/they do it, expunging the Funk, alone remains unpardonable. Their children will be monsters.

The relation of art to life is tenuous, uncertain. "Poetry makes nothing happen," W. H. Auden wrote, but *The Sorrows of Young Werther* made a generation of German youth into depressives and drove some, it's said, to suicide. I would not know how much, if any influence reading the works I've discussed, with their acting-white personages, might have on a young black person making his or her way in the world. Perhaps reading that many books would alone mark one as an Oreo. That the things that constitute "acting white"—staying in school and studying hard, speaking grammatically, being respectful and polite, seeking to rise in the world through conscientious effort—should be a matter of derision not only on the playground or in the street but in some of the most important black literature poses a melancholy irony. If "keeping

it real" precludes behaving in those socially acceptable and self-improving ways, then "keeping it real" needs to be rethought.

In his introduction to a collection of the essays of Leanita McClain, *A Foot in Each World*, Clarence Page writes:

She was the first black member of the *Chicago Tribune's* editorial board and the newspaper's second black staff columnist in its 137-year history. Two months before she died she was named one of America's ten most outstanding career women by *Glamour* magazine. She had received the Peter Lisagor Award from the Chicago chapter of Sigma Delta Chi, the Society of Professional Journalists; the 1983 Kizzy Award as an outstanding black female role model in Chicago, and in that same year the top award for commentary from the Chicago Association of Black Journalists.

The next year she committed suicide.

Reading McClain's essays and columns reveals a very complex person with many, often conflicting ideas and ideals. Even those closest to her were at a loss to explain why so accomplished and promising a person would take her own life. To exploit this tragic and inexplicable event simply to make an argument would be unconscionable, but she herself, in perhaps her most well-known piece, appearing in *Newsweek* in 1980, "The Middle-Class Black's Burden," makes the point that I want to make. When a black person achieves success in the big world, she writes, "a considerable number of the folks we left behind in the 'old country,' commonly called the ghetto ... can't berate middle class blacks enough for 'forgetting

where we came from'... [W]e are told we have sold out. We are Oreos, they say, black on the outside, white within." McClain acknowledged the ambiguous position of the successful black woman, "with a foot in each world." "I run a gauntlet between [these] two worlds, and am cursed and blessed by both."

As her later columns reveal, the white world proved the harder to keep her footing in, her integrationist ideals battered by the upsurge of vile and vicious racist comment occasioned by the (successful) campaign for mayor of Chicago by Harold Washington, a black man. But the resentment she felt from members of her own race made her footing there unsure as well, and hurt probably even more deeply. "As for the envy of my own people, am I to give up my career, my standard of living to pacify them and set my conscience at ease? No. I have worked too hard [for them], though I can never enjoy them without feeling guilty."

Would any young black person, wanting to act-white in the positive sense of that pejorative term, find any image of a white-acting person in the literature discussed above to inspire and encourage him to do so? Or do these works provide fictional manifestation, mocking or menacing, of the acting-white phenomenon, reflecting the response that Leanita McClain experienced in the resentment of her own people? W. E. B. DuBois spoke of the crab effect that characterizes many black people, a term based on his experience watching crabs caught in a buck-

et pull back down those who had found a way to escape. Is that the motive behind calling someone an oreo?

---

**Gorman Beauchamp** is the author of a book on Jack London and essays on subjects ranging from Shakespeare to science fiction; [gormanb@umich.edu](mailto:gormanb@umich.edu). Beauchamp is also an associate professor emeritus of humanities at the University of Michigan. He last appeared in these pages in the winter of 2024 with "Huck's Jim Goes Whiteface," a review of Percival Everett's *James: A Novel*.

---