

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND

Laura Sadowski

Business/ Brookfield, Wisconsin

It is always difficult for people to understand what they have not experienced. One example of this is racism; most people have never experienced it, and thus cannot understand what it is like to go through it. This makes it challenging for authors who write about racism to connect with their readers. Through use of the familiar Dick and Jane characters, Toni Morrison connects a white audience to African-American characters in her novel *The Bluest Eye*. However, this connection will grow weaker over time, as new generations become less familiar with Dick and Jane.

During the time when Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, most schools used the Dick and Jane readers to teach children to read. Therefore, the white audience that Morrison was trying to reach with *The Bluest Eye* was familiar with those characters. Dick and Jane were emblems of the American Dream for many children—both black and white—while growing up. Most children wanted to look, act, and live like Dick and Jane. They were the measuring stick to which children compared their lives. Morrison's audience grew up with these characters in school and most likely idolized them themselves. A trade journal reported that by 1946, fifty percent of all American schools used Dick and Jane readers, and by 1960 eighty-five percent used them (*Image*). Therefore, most children of that era were very familiar with the Dick and Jane characters and stories.

The very first section of *The Bluest Eye* is an example of a typical

Dick and Jane story. Morrison repeats the story three times. The first time it appears, Morrison writes the story with correct punctuation and spacing, the second time she writes it without any punctuation, and the third time she writes it without spaces between any of the words. This is symbolic of the life of the main character, Pecola. Pecola is an eleven year-old girl growing up in Lorain, Ohio in the 1940s. Her life starts out less than ideal, and by the end of the story, things only get worse. Throughout the course of the book, Pecola is forced to move in with another family, harassed by fellow classmates, blamed for killing a cat, rejected by her mother in favor of a white child, and raped and impregnated by her father. Her life continues to get worse and worse, until any idealism that was ever there blurs together, just as the Dick and Jane story does.

Just as she uses a Dick and Jane story to powerfully open the book, Morrison also uses typical sentences from the Dick and Jane readers to effectively introduce corresponding chapters of the book. For instance, to introduce the chapter about Pecola's family, Morrison uses Dick and Jane sentences such as "here is the family: Mother, Father, Dick and Jane. They live in the green and white house. They are very happy" (38). She then describes Pecola's family, which sticks out in sharp contrast to Dick and Jane's family. Dick and Jane's family represents the ideal American family, while Pecola's family represents the reality for many black families of that era. The contrast between Dick and Jane's family and Pecola's family make the problems in her family all the more obvious and extreme.

At the time Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye*, the Dick and Jane strategy was a very good one. It depicted for whites what many minorities thought of as being beautiful and ideal. Since many whites have not

experienced the extreme racism issues that African-Americans have, it is difficult for them to understand what they dealt with. The message of *The Bluest Eye* can only be fully understood if the reader has the proper perspective— that of Pecola and children like her. The Dick and Jane stories allow white readers to gain this perspective by seeing how the lives of minorities in America compared to their lives during the same time.

While the Dick and Jane stories were effective in giving whites the perspective needed to read *The Bluest Eye* at the time Morrison wrote it, that strategy is growing less effective as time goes on. Many students today did not grow up using the Dick and Jane readers, so they don't know what the characters look and act like. If the reader is not familiar with the Dick and Jane books, the strategy is ineffective and can actually serve to confuse the reader. Fewer schools use Dick and Jane readers every year. Scott, Foresman, & Co., the Dick and Jane publisher, stopped publishing the books in 1970 after forty years (*C Dickens*). It will be difficult for new generations to understand the importance of Dick and Jane to *The Bluest Eye* if they're not familiar with Dick and Jane. The section introductions and beginning of the book wouldn't mean anything to anyone who doesn't know who Dick and Jane are. Therefore, the Dick and Jane strategy is a short-term strategy that will lose its effect on younger generations.

Dick and Jane books are now difficult to come by. They are most commonly found in antique and collectible web pages on the Internet. It is unlikely that they will ever be reprinted due to the recent controversy surrounding their teaching style. For instance, the National Right to Read Foundation is one of many national groups that recently spoke out against the "look and say" method of the Dick and Jane readers in favor of the

phonics method (*National Right to Read Foundation*). Because of this, it is improbable that readers of the future will ever know anything about the Dick and Jane readers except that they are antiques that their ancestors used to learn from. The Dick and Jane readers will be to the children of the future what chalk slates are to children of today.

Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* about an era filled with racism and hatred. While the book may lose some of its effect on future generations, it had a profound effect on the generation Morrison wanted it to impact most—those who lived during the 1940s through the 1960s. In writing this book, Morrison wanted to paint a picture for whites of that generation of what it was like for a minority child to grow up at the same time. Much of the audience Morrison wrote had a childhood similar to Dick and Jane. The Dick and Jane stories cause white readers to remember what their childhood was like, and Pecola's story forces them to see how drastically different an African-American childhood often was.

When dealing with issues that haven't been experienced by the majority of the intended audience, authors must use some device to help readers understand. Toni Morrison effectively uses stories from the Dick and Jane books to show the ideals of American life in the mid 1900s and how those ideals contrast with the characters' lives. However, this device doesn't transcend time, and readers in the near future will most likely have trouble understanding the comparison and thus lost its effect. This may cause the book to lose some of its impact, since readers will not have the proper perspective when reading it. However, *The Bluest Eye* is still a very powerful book with a timeless message that will always get through to readers.

Works Cited

C. Dickens. We Followed Dick and Jane into a Bigger World. 1996.

C. Dickens. 10 Dec. 2000

<http://www.cdickens.com/articles/dickjane.htm>

Image. Reading Deeper: The Legacy of Dick and Jane in the Work of Clarissa Sligh. 1995.

Image. 10 Dec. 2000 <http://www.carlagirl.net/read/dickjane.html>

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: First Plume Printing, 1994.

National Right to Read Foundation. Illiteracy: An Incurable Disease or Education Malpractice? 1996.

National Right to Read Foundation. 10 Dec. 2000

http://www.nrrf.org/essay_Illiteracy.htm# whydofaultymethods >