

The Rhetoric of Reversal in Malorie Blackman's YA Trilogy

Just look at the swine! He makes me want to throw something at the TV screen. He's got the scent of blood in his nostrils. And look at that smile. Could it be any more smarmy! The General Election is only a couple of days away and he reckons he's going to glide into power on a landslide. I recognize that look. [X. . .] will never change. He thinks there's nothing to stop him getting back into power—and if the latest opinion polls are anything to go by, he's right. His brand of politics always makes the headlines, the politics of hate.

Our policies are failing? Blame the other political parties—remind the people that we may be bad, but they were worse or things would be worse under the other lot. Or . . . find a new scapegoat—a section of society with no power, no voice. Blame the travelers or the noughts or the immigrants. Cheap, gutter politics to appeal to the lowest common denominator (*Checkmate* 459-60).

In reading this passage from a novel by British novelist Malorie Blackman, it is almost impossible to avoid its applicability to the climate of hatred and divisiveness that has characterized the 2016 Presidential campaign in the U.S. Though apparently set in an unnamed England (with Prime Ministers, Parliament, British usage and spelling), Blackman's YA trilogy utilizes specific situations and issues that denote racial conditions in the U.S. over the past 100-plus years. As a result, the three novels (*Noughts and Crosses* [2001], *Knife Edge* [2004], and *Checkmate* [2005]) provide a comprehensive and shocking critique that should be read by American teenagers and adults alike.

("X" in the passage is Kamal Hadley, a Cross politician, who is being described by his ex-wife, Jasmine, in an interior monologue that reads like a current political blog. Hadley is a bully, a hypocrite, and an outrageous liar who will stop at nothing to destroy his enemies and secure his power. As such, he merely represents the extreme of racism and xenophobia that permeate his society as a whole.)

The novels construct a **rhetoric of reversal** that functions to provide simultaneously familiar realism and brutal shock: black is white and white is black in this economy. Within this structure the narrative operates by simple inversion or reversal: "noughts" (with a lower-case "n") are, in American English, "zeroes"—i.e., white, "blank," impoverished, powerless, former slaves who are referred to by Crosses as "blankers," in an overt reference to the pejorative U.S. nickname for African Americans but with the added emphasis on nothingness or erasure. Their antitheses are Crosses (with a capital "C"), who represent virtue, sacrifice, financial prosperity, total power; as blacks they are full of color and promise—i.e., the cultural and aesthetic ideal. Their chief holiday is "Crossmas." To the impotent noughts, of course, they are "daggers": dangerous and deadly.

The novels work by producing an effect of simple, unexaggerated reality. Using multiple points of view to express the internal realities of characters who live parallel but mutually incomprehensible experiences, Blackman also achieves authenticity and universality by describing realistic situations without distortion or omission; the irony is built in to the realism, as for example in the following description of officially sanctioned violence against the "blankers" from the point of view of a mixed-race participant in a peaceful protest: the report could have been quoted verbatim from a 2016 American newspaper:

It was horrific. Relentless images of Noughts being beaten up by Cross police, the battered, misshapen face of the Nought who was beaten to death for being in a "Cross" area, the limp and twisted dead body of the Nought who was tied up and dragged behind a car by two hate-filled Crosses, a Cross police officer stating quite seriously that the reason Noughts needed to be restrained with so much excessive force was the fact that they loved violence. . . (*Checkmate* 415-16).

Deploying newspaper accounts and various forms of intertextuality, she portrays a world that is both utterly familiar and radically inverted. No imagination was needed to construct this universe: she needed only to read, observe, record.

The themes are both predictable and shocking because so familiar: individualized racial prejudice (carefully taught), job discrimination, income inequality, separate-but-not-equal education, token inclusion of what DuBois called the "Talented Tenth," anti-miscegenation, noughts as "erotica-exotica" (*Knife* 310), liberal naivete and hypocrisy, mixed-race offspring, extreme police brutality, and so on. Tying the narrative together are the star-crossed lovers who play together as children, then are forced apart by their racial identities. Callum McGregor is a working-class nought whose mother, Meggie, works for Jasmine Hadley until she is summarily fired for a perceived betrayal, thrusting the family into poverty and depriving Callum's brother, Jude, of an education (with future repercussions). Sephy (Persephone) Hadley, Kamal and Jasmine's daughter, is a wealthy Cross whose love for Callum results in despair and tragedy. As the "heroine," Sephy dominates the shifting focalization throughout the three novels and her eventual epiphany regarding love constitutes the hopeful counterpoint to the books' grim representation throughout most of their 1,320 pages.

My paper will explore both the **rhetoric of reversal** and its **effect on the reader**, building on the insight of poet Jackie Kay that "By turning the world upside down, Malorie Blackman makes her readers see things even more clearly." Or, alternatively, she may actually allow them to see for the very first time.