

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, Analyzed Through the Lens of a Cultural Materialism

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Abstract

Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* follows a young black woman as she grapples with the conflicting pressures of the black beauty ideal and the reality of violence in the black community. Morrison shows that even the most well-intentioned people may damage one another in the story when they are bound by poverty and social disgrace. Morrison argues that people's desire to use violence is a misperception. According to them, negative expressions of love lead to distortion, which in turn causes agony.

Keywords— cultural materialism, racism, slavery, socioeconomic status, and gender.

I. INTRODUCTION

A community is defined as a group of individuals who interact with one another, and to live in a community is to be sociable. African Americans in the United States have been contentious subjects since the end of slavery. As a result of racial segregation, the African American population began to fight for equality. Both men and women of African descent, incensed by the oppression of African Americans, wrote works that featured these characters in various forms throughout society. Against the backdrop of a predominantly African American community, Toni Morrison's novel explores questions of gender and motherhood as they relate to racial injustice. The research also looks at social issues, including racism and other types of social injustice.

II. SOCIOECONOMIC BIAS

According to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the identities of African Americans have been influenced by a variety of factors, including income, education, kinship, and the color of one's skin. Various African American households are shown in the story, as well as their social level. The racial discrimination against African American characters in *The Bluest Eye* can be traced back to the dominant white society. "Mother work or mother love is a term coined by Morrison to describe a particular model of practice based on her standard maternal point of view on black motherhood. A mother's task is defined by three requirements, according to Ruddick: preservation, growth, and societal approval. Being a mother means being

dedicated to providing for the needs of your children via acts of preservation, love, nurturing, and education, as explained further by Ruddick (O'Reilly, 2012: 27).

According to O'Reilly, "the first job of mothers is to safeguard their children to preserve anything sensitive and valuable in a child" (O'Reilly, 2012: 80). The cat's mishap is the best example of this. Nobody wants to play with Junior, a little African-American youngster who lives next to the school playground. When he spots Pecola, a poor black girl, traversing the playground, Junior seizes the opportunity to assault her sexually. During their argument about the playground, he asserts his authority and invites her to meet his kitten at his house. To view the kitten, Pecola happily accepts Junior's offer of a visit. When she saw the interior of the mansion, she felt like she had been given a gift that she couldn't refuse. When Junior saw other African American children, he felt superior to them: "Mother did not like him to play with niggers... colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison, 2019: 87).

Despite his self-awareness, Junior has the audacity to do anything. Afterward, he plays a cruel game with his mother's favorite cat, Pecola. As a result of Pecola's fear, the cat is thrown against a window, where it is lost forever. Junior's mother arrives the next instant to find out that her beloved cat has died. Right away, she begins to demonstrate her long-standing hostility toward black children:

"They were everywhere ... they sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded in pews at

church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children . . . broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter" (Morrison, 2019: 92).

Geraldine depicts the way of life of African-Americans in society through Pecola, Junior's mother. In no event will she concede that Pecola was not to blame for the death of her cat. When it comes to saving a child's life, the demand grows swiftly; as Ruddick points out, Junior's mother intervenes to protect her son from the black community's ill will. Pecola's motherly love for her kid is on full display.

Furthermore, *The Bluest Eye* uses the MacTeers family as an example of an impoverished family that can provide a short-term home for a poorer African American "case" like Pecola. It's safe to say that the MacTeers are harsher than the Geraldines are. Adults don't communicate with us; they offer us directions; and, as Claudia herself puts it, if we cut or hurt ourselves, they question our sanity and wonder whether we've gone insane. Geraldine and MacTeers are stricter than the Geraldine and MacTeers couples, respectively. According to Claudia herself, this is what she believes "Adults do not talk to us; they give us directions ... when we trip and fall down, they glance at us: if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy" (Morrison, 2019: 92).

Ruddick highlights mother labor as "To be committed to meeting children's demand for preservation, growth, and social acceptance" (O'Reilly, 2012: 27). And does not require excitement or even love. It simply means to perceive vulnerability and respond to it with care rather than abuse, apathy, or fighting. She is a good mother who takes care of her children's needs and prepares them for life in a world where they will have to deal with persecution. In the end, Claudia reveals that the parents' strictness is merely an attempt by them to protect their daughter from the outside world, which has already been experienced by them. However, Morrison's goal of instruction is intensified through the character of MacTeer and the parenting of children in the dominant African-American society.

III. INFERIORITY

Regarding African American men and women, Morrison portrays the latter as inferior. This oppression is felt by black women, who have to serve their husbands even when they are not properly cared for. Pauline Breedlove is one of the novel's most downtrodden characters because of her racial oppression in the United States. As stated by Hooks:

"White people established a social hierarchy based on race and sex that ranked white men first, white women second, sometimes equal to black men, who are ranked third, and black women last". (Hooks, 2014: 52)

Furthermore, in the disadvantaged African American community, money gives men a false sense of power. With his family's financial situation deteriorating rapidly, Pauline Breedlove's husband, Cholly Breedlove, is living on the fringes of society. When it comes to his wife and children, he treats them like they're the only ones in the house. Some happy childhood memories and early marriage in Lorain, which Pauline calls the "lone some'stime of my life," dominated Pauline Breedlove's life story. It demonstrates that she had no idea what to expect when she moved to the north "I don't know what all happened Everything changed. It was hard to get. To know folks up here, and I missed my People...Up north they war everywhere...Next door, deconstain all over the streets" (Morrison, 2019: 93).

As a result of seeing this racially divided and antagonistic environment, Pauline's inferiority versus the whites forces her to perform odd jobs for white masters. To no avail, she began watching movies and trying to mimic the whites. A lot of Pauline's inferiority mentality stems from the movies she watches. In them, she learns about the virtues and physical beauty she admires. She makes an effort to focus on the white master's residence and demonstrates her abilities as an organized servant in the process. When she thinks of herself as "the ideal servant," she is unable to enjoy herself in any other capacity (Morrison, 2019: 93). Because of this, Pauline is reduced to living in a world of black-and-white images, which are projected onto her subconscious by a ray of light or feelings of inferiority.

Pauline was denied the right to be a mother to her children since she was a slave in the fisherman's house. Motherhood is seen as a breeding ground for offspring in African American society; slave women are separated from their children and made to work in the fields doing odd jobs. In Barbara Hill Rigney's view, slavery's greatest honor was its destruction of families and the rejection of a mother's right to love her child (Rigney, 1998: 68). Consequently, Pauline Breedlove is regarded by her family as a good breeder of her own children, and as her inferiority arises, she shares her motherly love with the fisherman's child. As a mother, she can wear the halo of the Madonna, and bring about societal change through her moral influence and social housekeeping.

While the book *The Bluest Eye* portrays white society as exclusive and middle-class, it also depicts black people as oppressed and marginalized. There is no doubt that the

novel's most prominent and widely discussed theme is that of race relations. That's what Morrison claims. Is it possible to find out who decides that the white ideal is the ideal? This question has haunted anybody who has looked extensively into the idea of a white standard of beauty. For Pecola in particular, who gave her the impression that being a freak was preferable to what she actually was? Who had looked at her and considered her so lacking, so low on the scale of beauty? This is an in-depth look at dolls, celebrities, movies, and the media in which black people aspire to emulate the white ideal to achieve this goal.

An incomprehensible amount of pain is felt by the black population, and they are directed "outdoors" (Morrison, 2019: 15). Claudia, the novel's main narrator, provides the framework for understanding the interaction between the black community and society. "There is a difference between being put out and being put outdoors," Claudia says to me. "If you are put out, you go somewhere else, and if you are outdoors, there is no place to go... Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life" (Morrison, 2019: 17). To avoid further exposure to the elements, Pecola seeks refuge with the MacTeers family, where he learns about racism. Claudia, who is unable to comprehend the idolization of the dolls, is often compelled to destroy her own dolls because of her feelings of repulsion (Morrison, 2019: 21).

What is clear from Claudia's emotions about her doll is that she still views herself as a child. In spite of her youth, Claudia makes an important point about the rage, frustration, and anguish that come from the black community's exclusion from mainstream culture. Claudia has to deal with the survival practices that she picked up from her mother. Taking the doll apart indicates her indignation at society and white ideology, and she believes that she has not yet reached the stage in her psyche where she can begin to love someone (Morrison, 2019: 21).

Media is another way that the "white ideal" pervades society at large, even if dolls are a more specific example. An illustration of the white ideal can be seen in Pauline's experience with film. When it comes to achieving success, Denis Heinze argues that these two sets of values go hand in hand: if an individual is fully separated from society and her community, she will inevitably succumb to the world in which she lives (Bouson, 2002: 76). Consequently, the black community is visible and painfully clear to the rest of society. One other illustration is the Christmas Eve dolls that are presented to youngsters. As youngsters, the dolls show that white middle-class values should affect them even before they reach adulthood, and they teach them which characteristics are beautiful or good and which ones

are ugly or terrible (Bouson, 2002: 32). Pauline believes throughout the story that she is a better person because of it.

"the loneliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They cuts off the lights and everything be black. The screen would light up and I'd more right on them picture" (Morrison, 2019: 93).

From the film's point of view, Pauline's experience in the picture reads like her own. This demonstrates Pauline's adherence to white society's ideals, which leads to a harrowing and unavoidable existence for her. Pauline, as Kern Carmean points out, Pauline clings to a role assigned by others, and in doing so, she denies herself the opportunity to evolve. Countless people have joined her in embracing white culture and ideals. To put it another way, norms of behavior that reject their core principles in favor of erroneous or even destructive standards (O'Reill, 2012: 27).

She becomes a victim of her own failure and is locked in the world of being for the other while concurrently living a life of self-hatred, alienation, self-loathing, and an enviable demise. Society's standards of beauty and whites' views stated that if black women or the African-American community met these goals, they would be accepted and allowed back into the mainstream of society. Members of the community's black population work hard to fit in and live up to society's norms.

IV. INEQUALITY AND ONE'S OWN SENSE OF SELF-WORTH

Morrison's writings produce a compelling representation of the impact of violence and discrimination on the most helpless people. Morrison's novel, written forty years ago, addresses racism and sexual violence, both of which remain pressing themes today. Morrison effortlessly conveys the systematic tyranny and adversity that each of her characters experiences, and she portrays the realities of her society within the realm of children's literature. At the novel's outset, Pecola's insanity and her obsession with gaining the approval of those around her are introduced. Since Pecola has never known a truly supportive family, she has come to believe that her life would be easier if only she were more physically attractive. Morrison stresses the significance of parental affection and the value of the parent modeling and encouraging a healthy sense of identity for their developing child. Morrison believes that the first priority in loving oneself is to love oneself.

O'Reilly claims that "Morrison's writings reflect her belief that mothering is essential for the emotional well-being of children because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives to that child a loved sense of self" (O'Reilly, 2012: 33). Rich writes: "The nurture of the daughters in a patriarchy calls for a strong sense of self-nurture in the mother" (O'Reilly, 2012: 33). Thus, as was mentioned previously in the cultural underpinnings, the self-love necessary for genuine motherly love is rooted in one's ancestors' memory and old qualities.

If Pecola's parents have this kind of self-love, she won't be abandoned in the "outdoors" or driven insane. The society in which Pecola lives has a significant impact on the course of events in *The Bluest Eye*. She is surrounded by people who hate themselves and think the African American population as a whole has an unpleasant physical trait. The author, Claudia, expresses Pecola's faith thus: "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Fultz, 2003: 50).

The narrator emphasizes once more that Pecola was convinced of the life-altering potential of physical attractiveness. "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes—those eyes that held the pictures and knew the heights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Fultz, 2003: 39–40). Morrison makes it apparent that Pecola's life problem is the lack of affection and support she receives from her family, and that this desire causes her to seek to remove herself and lose her self-image, which leads to progressively worsening reality. Differences in treatment and lack of affection separate Breedlove from other blacks, notably the MacTeers. Pecola is able to get through by loving and protecting those around them, but they can't bring themselves to do the same. Consequently, self-confidence is initially fostered within themselves, and many of the other people who affect Pecola have been taught all their lives to cultivate it. Morrison uses *The Bluest Eye* to discuss the effects of internalized racism on the innocent. However, Claudia notes while reflecting on Pecola's final result. Specifically, she emphasizes:

"The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way . . . among all the waste and beauty of the world which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us" (Morrison, 2019: 79).

As a result, Pecola was subjected to the community's trash, which obscured the world's first impression of her inherent value as a girl and a person. *The Bluest Eye* thus reveals

how prejudice and societal pressures have affected a vulnerable young woman. Its consequences, however, are applicable to anyone who has ever felt helpless, unjust, or oppressed.

The upper-class family shown in *The Bluest Eye* lives next to the playground, yet they refuse to mix with their lower- and middle-class neighbors. The same is true for Junior, whose mother forbids him to hang out with other black kids and who is unable to enjoy a fulfilling life herself. She is constantly enraged and cognizant of the plight of the African American poor because she hopes to raise awareness of class injustice.

Morrison vividly depicts the lives of black people in an oppressive society while simultaneously emphasizing the black community's external look. Claudia, the novel's independent protagonist, describes the least constrained groups in African American culture. In her writing, she exposes the inner turmoils of her characters, who are marginalized by society. Claudia, a person who has a strong social network behind her, reveals the inner and outer struggles of the characters. Through Pecola, Morrison depicts the tenacity of a terrified enslaved girl. Morrison's novel's comprehensive depictions of motherhood require sympathy not only from Pecola but also from society at large. This research shows that black women and girls face multiple forms of discrimination, including mental illness as a result of their experiences and a representation of the sensitivity and vulnerability of their grief in today's society.

V. CONCLUSION

Economic collapse and its repercussions on migration are explored in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The book acknowledges the emotional and mental oppression that black women face. Claudia and her sister Frieda are currently residing in Lorain with their parents. Since her erratic father, Cholly, burned down the family home, they have taken in a tenant named Mr. Henry and a foster child named Pecola Breedlove.

The concept of African American culture can be traced back to the narrative of Pecola. As a quiet young girl, she is subjected to verbal and physical abuse at the hands of her bickering parents. As a result, she is continually reminded of how badly she wishes she were a white girl with blue eyes so that she could fit in with her racist neighborhood. Most of the story headings are taken directly from the prologue, which Dick and Jane write. (Rich, 2003: 62)

We see Cholly and Pauline, Pecola's parents, as they were when they were younger and learn about the challenges

they had growing up as African Americans in a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant area. Mother Pauline is a maid for a privileged white family. Cholly, Pauline's husband, and Pecola's father raped her when he was intoxicated, and the traumatizing effects of that experience are brought to light by the juxtaposition with the present. Both women are helpless victims of their miserable circumstances.

Only Claudia and Frieda in the neighborhood believe that Pecola's unborn kid has a chance of survival after Cholly abandons her while she is pregnant. Instead of buying a bike, they decide to plant marigold seeds with the money they had set aside, under the superstitious notion that the child's survival is tied to the marigold's success. Like Pecola's stillborn baby, the marigold flower never opens up. Finally, Claudia, the narrator, expresses regret for Pecola's petty treatment and her failure to triumph over her difficulties due only to her race. Because of bigotry, the novel's poor black protagonist, Cholly Breedlove, suffers economically and emotionally. Poverty and deprivation have battered his existence. (Schreiber, 2020: 53)

Pecola, a little girl in *The Bluest Eye*, is shown to be in a state of bewilderment and isolation as a result of the book's central theme—the struggle between a person's sense of self and his or her relationships with his or her family, friends, and community. This is the root of the character's downfall. Another way in which she demeans African Americans and undermines their quest for autonomy and individuality is through the institution of slavery. These slaves have had their humanity snatched away to the point where they are unable to love another human being or even parent their own children. Slaves can neither fully own themselves nor aspire to alter their sense of identity.

Cholly Breedlove suffers from traumatic stress as a result of his encounters with prejudiced degradation. Cholly, who feels helpless and defenseless in the face of his oppressors, resorts to violence against his family in an attempt to rid himself of his personal evil. He abuses his wife, burns down his house, and even rapes his daughter. Cholly's tragedy is emblematic of the broader black African American community, which is feeling the sting of racial injustice and reacting with anger, resentment, and upheaval towards white people. While some black communities, like Cholly, succumb to white intimidation and fail terribly, others, like Mr. MacTeer, stand firm in the face of oppression and fight to maintain their dignity and pride. In the book, Mr. MacTeer is portrayed as a roadblock that prevents Cholly from continuing. Morrison uses him and his family to demonstrate that black men and women can thrive despite the hostility of racism by forging strong

family and community ties, working hard, and maintaining a flexible attitude (Reyes, Marc, 2000: 68).

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