
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Life in Trauma: An Analysis of Black People's Living Condition in *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the depiction of black people's living conditions in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, focusing on the trauma and systemic oppression experienced by the three main characters. By employing literary criticism and historical context, the analysis examines how Morrison portrays the intersection of race, poverty, and psychological trauma within the black community, and how the conditions of life for black people are shaped by traumatic experiences rooted in historical and systemic injustices. The findings reveal how the characters' experiences reflect broader social issues of racism and inequality, illustrating the pervasive impact of systemic discrimination on their mental and emotional well-being. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the novel's commentary on race and trauma, highlighting its relevance to contemporary discussions on social justice.

KEYWORDS

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, black people, life trauma, oppression

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1. Introduction

Written by Toni Morrison and first published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first book and it tells the traumatic life of an eleven-year-old young black girl. In this novel, Morrison tries to demonstrate the unimaginable damage that strong racial discrimination can bring to the most vulnerable member of this society: a young girl, and also to reveal and represent the traumatic living conditions of other black people who are close to this black girl.

Toni Morrison is the first and the only black woman who has received the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her achievement in writing mainly lies in presenting the real life of black people and making contributions to the preservation and transmission of black culture. She writes with words, phrases and figures of speech which are unique in the race which she belongs to. Moreover, Morrison is especially good at using the techniques of stream-of-consciousness, multiple perspectives, and combining words with traditional black music rhythm such as the blues, jazz, and gospel. Her work is regarded as a milestone in the history of African-American literature.

2. Literature Review

The concept of trauma is central to understanding the lived experiences of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison uses trauma not only as a thematic concern but also as a structural element that mirrors the fragmentation and disorientation often associated with traumatic experiences. Based on that, many scholars have discussed the elements and techniques from the perspective of trauma theory. Boudreau's (1995) analysis discusses how internalized ideals of whiteness and beauty contribute to the characters' psychological breakdowns. Witalec's (1998) introduction discusses Morrison's use of fragmented storytelling to reflect the characters' disjointed memories and experiences of trauma, focusing on how systemic oppression and personal violence intersect

to shape the characters' identities and experiences. Tally (2009) also provides a critical analysis that includes trauma theory to explore the novel's depiction of the psychological effects of racism and trauma on African American individuals. Morrison portrays racial trauma as a pervasive force that shapes the daily living conditions of black individuals and communities. Whitehead (2004) suggests that literature dealing with trauma often reflects societal issues of racial and cultural identity. This study builds on Whitehead's insights by trying to examine how Morrison depicts the intersection of racial trauma and socioeconomic hardship, showing how these factors compound to create a life marked by psychological and physical suffering.

3. Character Analysis

The protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is a little black girl named Pecola; she had been longing for long for a pair of blue eyes which only the white could possess. As a black girl, she was bullied and discriminated against due to her skin color and even she felt ashamed of her ugly appearance, so she desperately wanted to run away from her current situation and to live the same life as the white people. In American society at that time, although the situation of the blacks had been improved, they still lived a life of poverty and could not receive good education and equal work opportunities as the whites. Actually, in this novel, not only Pecola but also her parents had suffered a lot from the trauma of a variety kinds of causes such as racism, family factors, early experience, and a deep sense of inferiority.

3.1 Cholly Breedlove

As Pecola's father and the head of the Breedlove family, Cholly Breedlove was an impulsive, violent and dangerous man; he often took out his frustration on the women in his life. Actually, such behaviors mainly resulted from the trauma of his humiliating early experience. "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose." (Morrison, 189) Cholly was deserted by his parents soon after birth and was brought up by his old aunt Jimmy. He did not get enough care and love from his parents so most of the time, he felt lonely and isolated. When grown up and for the first time he had feelings for a female, two white men humiliated him by forcing him to have sex with the girl in front of them merely for amusement. Therefore, all the shame and hatred suddenly turned into fury and were later magnified at that time. (Chen, 13)

In fact, Cholly was a fragile boy at first; it was the genuine suffering of early experience that traumatized him and caused his distorted mind and personality: Cholly thus became free, "dangerously free (Morrison, 189)". Although he was not free to love and be loved or to receive the respect and full dignity that he deserved, he was free to laugh, to weep, to get drunk, to have sex, to act violently, and even to kill. He gave up on himself and cared about nothing, because nothing interested him then. "Only in drink was there some break, some floodlight, and when that closed, there was oblivion." (190) Cholly indulged himself in alcohol all day and became indifferent to death. After he had burnt down his house, "Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger." (24) When he finally fell apart, he reached to his daughter Pecola by raping her to remind himself that he was still alive. (Ward, 24)

Toni Morrison imposed the most sinful behavior on Cholly Breedlove, and by all means, we should have hated him. However, Morrison did not want any character to lose humanity so she gave Cholly a reasonable excuse for all those intolerable behaviors. She managed to make Cholly a sympathetic figure who had been traumatized by a miserable early experience. He never had received or felt paternal or maternal love from his parents so he did not know how to build up a family except only to respond to poverty and oppression by drinking heavily and abusing his wife Pauline. "He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her could leave himself intact." (52) At last, Cholly was eventually disintegrated and died alone in a poorhouse with no loved ones by his side, just like the way he came to this world, all alone.

3.2 Pauline Breedlove

Similar to her husband, Pauline Breedlove was also a sympathetic, traumatized character who suffered from peers' ignorance, husband's violence, racial discrimination and self-hatred. Pauline was traumatized first by her disability, the lame foot, which convinced her that she was doomed to be lonely and isolated. "Nobody teased her; she never felt at home anywhere or that she belonged to any place... Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot." (131) Actually, she had always been dreaming a sounding dream in which a man changed her life and brought her happiness, confidence and hope. Then Cholly came.

After knowing Cholly and getting married, Pauline followed her husband to the North Ohio where the whites were highly respected and the blacks were treated badly by casting despised eyes on. Pauline felt marginalized in this community: "Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here. They could make you feel just as no-count... That was the loneliest time of my life (138)." Thus Cholly was left to be the only one whom Pauline could seek comfort from. With more and more demand from wife, Cholly began to resist her dependence; gradually the couple fought with each other every day and Pauline severely suffered from husband's abuse, which resulted in Cholly's burning their house in the end.

The coming of two black kids did not raise Pauline up but brought her more frustration instead. Assimilated by local people, she began to hate her own skin color and thought that her children were ugly too; she treated them coldly and imposed a lot of pain especially on her daughter Pecola. "Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (151) The transition of Pauline's mind mainly attributed to the external discrimination from people around her including those who had the same skin color as her. She was laughed at and ridiculed in terms of her hair style and dressing, which took away the only remaining self-esteem in her body.

Those traumatic experience of being discriminated led Pauline to another extreme. She hated her black identity and lost herself in the white-dominant mainstream. She tried to cast away all that represented her black identity including her black family, black skin and southern accent; she tried to cater to local people's value that the white were superior to the black and put all the meaningfulness of her life into working for the white master. After he found a job as the servant of a white family, less and less attention was paid to her own house, her man and her two children. "They were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely." (150) She loved to work for the white because she could enjoy "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise (150)" in that fantasy world.

3.3 Pecola Breedlove

As the little daughter of two deeply traumatized parents, Pecola is the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* and also the biggest victim of trauma. She was a fragile and delicate child at first but was almost destroyed at the end of the story by trauma from not only community racism but also family indifference. In the region where Pecola lived, the black were thought to be inferior to the white and even the colored race despise on them: "Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud (105)", which caused her firmly believing that she was ugly. Apart from in the neighborhood, Pecola was also discriminated and ignored by teachers and classmates at school due to her ugly appearance. She was the only one in class who did not have a desk mate and the teachers "tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond (56)". However, Pecola did not seem to care about the contempt and faced it with unexpected calmness, which on the contrary, reflected the fear and helplessness in her inner heart.

Pecola's family lived in an abandoned storefront because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed that they were ugly and "no one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly (47)". Their house was broken and shabby, and the decorations and furniture were outmoded and dilapidated. There was no so-called kinship among family members and nothing in their house showed a sense of vitality except the coal stove. In her family, Pecola was considered to be ugly by her mother from the day she was born: "...a cross between a puppy and a dying man. And I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly (148)." She did not receive enough love and care from parents that a daughter deserved but infinite indifference and ignorance, and such kind of feeling got stronger when she saw her parents quarrel and fight again and again that she usually whispered: "Please, God, please make me disappear (56)" and "squeeze her eyes shut and covered her head with the quilt (56)". In face of family conflicts, Pecola could only place her hope on disappearance because she dared not to step in between a violent father and a pitiless mother. Her not daring to rebel finally resulted in physical injure of being raped twice by her natural father Cholly.

For all the reasons above, poor Pecola desperately desired a pair of blue eyes because she believed that blue eyes could make her life different and bring her happiness. At that time, white was considered beautiful and superior. On Christmas day "all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured (26)". In order to get blue eyes, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes fervently. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope (57)." Sometimes when feeling ashamed, Pecola would like to eat several pieces of Mary Jane candy, because on each candy wrapper there was a picture of Mary Jane who had blue eyes and yellow hair and Pecola thought "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes (62)" of Mary Jane and be Mary Jane. Besides, Pecola particularly loved drinking milk as if it had magical power and she could get rid of her disgusting black skin by taking in as much that white fluid as possible.

At last, Pecola got the blue eyes as she ever wished but it was at the expense of losing sanity, for she became mentally distorted after being raped the second time by her father and the baby she gave birth to unfortunately died soon after birth. As a matter of fact, the realization of the wish that a little black girl yearned for blue eyes from a white girl was much more terrifying and evil than the wish itself. Nevertheless, from another perspective, Pecola's stepping over into madness did protect her from the cruel world and other people's discrimination; her blue eyes that she had got in her own world brought her simple satisfactory and pure happiness: "Oh, yes. My eyes. My blue eyes. Let me look again. They get prettier each time I look at them (237)". But the hurtful fact was that the blue eyes would forever be a beautiful dream after all.

4. Conclusion

After a limited study and analysis of different kinds of trauma in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's intention of writing this book is almost completely revealed in front of readers' eyes. By creating several sympathetic figures in a particular historical period and giving them traumatic life, Morrison aims to represent the truest image of a white dominant society and calls for African-Americans to acknowledge their own history and keep the heritage of traditional black culture. She also wants to bring the truth to light that only by relying on and seeking strength from their own culture heritage, can African-Americans heal the trauma and move on to a brand new life and a brighter future.

This is the charm of tragedy: it not only makes readers sorrowful but also provokes their deeper thoughts on black people's suffering living conditions, just as another little black girl in this novel once said: "We were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved. We courted death in order to call ourselves brave and hid like thieves from life. We rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in a new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word (241)".

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