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Self-hatred and Its Consequences in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Introduction

In my daily work as a teacher I regularly encounter teenagers who struggle to meet the demands they think they have to live up to. The void these students are experiencing inside is not filled though, and just like Pecola, the African American girl looking for blue eyes in Toni Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, they can go to extremes to avoid the feeling of inadequacy. What are the consequences of growing up in a world where nobody loves or accepts you? When reading *The Bluest Eye*, it is impossible not to feel both sadness and revulsion. This compelling novel with its description of people who are ostracised, belittled and abused is relevant even today since feelings of self-hatred are still a huge problem in our society. This analysis will focus on how the consequences of self-hatred, ugliness and racism are manifested in the characters' lives.

When Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* in 1970, she was questioning how white standards of beauty could “consume and even break, especially young, women”, according to Melissa R. Sande (2016). Sande also argues that the community in the novel responds to a little girl's victimisation in a violent sexual act by ignoring her, instead of trying to help her. Sande further states that *The Bluest Eye* serves as a microcosm for America and she examines how the innocence of a small girl could represent the innocence of America. The challenge of being black during Jim Crow-era America and beyond, with all the negative memories and legacy from slavery coupled with poverty and an overwhelming feeling of inferiority, becomes more obvious through the eyes of innocent children. The childhood traumas portrayed in the novel serve to illustrate the adversities many African American people, particularly women, still struggle with.

By deconstructing “the myth of childhood innocence” (Sande), Morrison draws parallels to the innocence of the American nation. The Civil Rights Movement and women's liberation movement both had a positive impact on society during the 1960s but many feminists argue that the main focus of the latter was on white middle-class women. Morrison shows in her novel that young black girls were not only oppressed by white standards of beauty but also by other black people, thus being doubly oppressed. Morrison makes us aware of race being integral to the discussion of gender (Sande).

My essay will show to what extent lack of love and compassion effect not only the child Pecola, but also the family and the entire community. In the novel the culture of

oppression is internalized and inherited, which can have disastrous consequences, both socially and psychologically.

Background

Toni Morrison, born February 18, 1931, Lorain, Ohio, US, is a contemporary American writer who has portrayed the lives of people in American black culture and community. Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford and according to herself her parents, although working class, encouraged her to study. She also gained a huge appreciation for black culture, storytelling and songs from her parents (biography.com). Morrison received her master's degree in literature from Cornell University in 1955 and later she became a professor at Princeton University. She had at that time already become a famous writer and has since been awarded both the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 and the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 as well as numerous other prizes and awards for her writing.

Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was published in 1970. In the preface, she refers to a story from her childhood when a school friend told Morrison she wanted blue eyes to become beautiful. Later in life Morrison recalled this episode and wrote a novel about a girl who thought she would have a better life if she could only have blue eyes. Her following novels *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) also revolve around the harsh conditions for African Americans. The latter novel in particular was published to great acclaim and with her book *Beloved* (1987) she received further accolades. She has also written children's literature as well as non-fiction work (*Playing in the Dark* 1992 and *What moves at the Margin*, 2008). Now in her eighties, she is still very active and in 2015 she published her most recent novel, *God Help the Child*.

The Bluest Eye in brief

Pecola Breedlove is a little black girl, who grows up in a small community, longing to be as beautiful as the white girls in movies. Pecola's yearning for love and acceptance makes her believe she would be happy if she could only have blue eyes. The narrative begins when Pecola is sent to the MacTeer family after her father has tried to set the Breedlove family house on fire. One of the narrators of the story, Claudia MacTeer, befriends Pecola and she is the one who recalls the events during a year in one of her preteen years during the 1930s. Through Claudia's eyes we follow the tragic story of Pecola's life and her ultimate breakdown after her father rapes her. However, the novel also describes the community's inability to help Pecola and the problems the black community faces in a society where whiteness is both a norm and an ideal. From the very beginning of the novel we learn that something awful has happened to Pecola, although we do not know yet how it came about: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (Morrison 3). The quote comes from Claudia MacTeer, who guides us through parts of the story about Pecola and the society they both live in. Claudia is important both as one of the narrators of the story and also as a counterbalance to Pecola. Apart from Claudia there are several other focalisers and narrators, such as Pauline Breedlove's stream-of-consciousness monologues, Cholly Breedlove, Soaphead Church, and even Pecola's own split personalities towards the end of the novel, and the omniscient narrator.

The contrast between her life and that of Pecola may also be one of the reasons Claudia takes such interest in Pecola, and by depicting the girls' somewhat different experiences of life we are able to see the misery surrounding the Breedlove family. Pecola's story is told through Claudia's recollections of the circumstances and as an adult Claudia acknowledges feelings of guilt and shame for letting Pecola down and not helping her. She confesses: "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. All of us – all who knew her – felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (203).

Theoretical framework

Many scholars have written about ethnicity and race, especially concerning problems like segregation, sexual violence and sexism. In *Literary Theory- A Practical Introduction* (2007), Michael Ryan summarises the view that although there are no scientific reasons to divide people into different races, they still play an important role in how we classify ourselves and others (178). Morrison brings up this problem in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), in which she describes how American fiction has always been positioned as “white” and the resulting difficulties she faces when trying to manoeuvre her narration in a racialized society like that of the United States. One of those problems is knowing whom she is representing as an author, since she feels she is always representing her own race but understands that many of her readers are “universal or race free” (Morrison xiii). Morrison also describes what she calls American Africanism, which is based on a study of “the ways in which a non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (Morrison 6). She argues that Africanism has become a way of constructing a division between African-Americans and the dominating Eurocentric tradition, which would include “ways of talking about matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability” (7). Furthermore, Morrison claims that “evasion and silence have historically ruled literary discourse” (9), which has led to an even greater distance between “whiteness” and “darkness” in literary criticism. She also argues that there is a lack of description of the impact racism has on the individual subject in terms of notions of racial hierarchy and racial exclusion as well as “what the racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (12).

Unfortunately, race and ethnicity remain an important factor in many societies and prescribed differences due to skin colour still have a great impact on the reality of many people. Ethnic literary studies have moved away from focusing on the “attention on the bleaching out of other-than-dominant ethnic experiences by the privilege given whiteness in Eurocentric, North American literary study” (Ryan 179). Recently this view has been challenged and instead African Americans and other groups wish to integrate other voices into the literary canon. However, Ryan also points out that black people are still often

pictured as slaves to white people and that white peoples' freedom often is contrasted with black peoples' servitude (180). In Morrison's novel this is shown through the many images we are presented with from the Breedlove family's inability to free themselves from white standards, most tragically embodied in Pecola's wish for blue eyes. The Breedloves have fully bought the concept of black as "negative" or "lacking", exemplified by their lack of family ties, their lack of proper housing and above all their lack of love and respect.

Another theory that can be applied to the study of literature is the Critical Race Theory, or CRT. CRT scholars try to examine how people exposed to prejudices due to cultural perceptions of race are portrayed and how they wish to portray themselves. CRT scholars attempt to challenge systematic racism by confronting the beliefs that enable it. They also find it important to study an individual's character, social class or sexuality in order to explain that race has nothing to do with intellectual capacity, moral behaviour or other distinctly human traits (Delgado and Stefancic 9). To CRT scholars the term "white privilege" is an institutional set of benefits granted to those who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in society. Francis E. Kendall explains that: "One of the primary privileges is that of having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors are open to us that are not open to other people" (Kendall). He also emphasises that white privilege has nothing to do with being a good or bad person but solely the fact that a person belongs to a certain race (Kendall).

CRT scholars also use the term "micro-aggressions" to refer to the frequently occurring but unintentional acts of racism some groups are exposed to by the dominant cultures (DeAngelis). An advocate for this theory is Richard Delgado, who argues in "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative" that stories and narratives can serve as a reminder of the identity of a group, by creating a common history, understanding and strengthen bonds. Delgado describes what he calls "ingroups" and "outgroups". An outgroup is described as a group that is living on the margin, "whose consciousness has been suppressed, devalued, and abnormalized" (Delgado 60). Furthermore, he discusses how the stories of dominant groups are important as bearers of a common identity and shared reality where the ingroups' superiority "is seen as a natural thing" (Delgado 60). He also emphasises that for many outgroups it is the mindset of the dominant groups that justifies a hierarchical world, with white people at the top and black people at the bottom, no matter what legal or political proceedings there are. "These matters are rarely

focused on. They are like eyeglasses we have worn a long time”, according to Delgado (61). Delgado’s solution to this problem is storytelling. CRT is relevant for discussing the problems faced in *The Bluest Eye*, since both the individuals and the community are still subject to the cultural and institutional discrimination and feelings of inferiority. Thus, *The Bluest Eye* can be seen as the story of an “outgroup”.

Apart from racism, oppression through gender inequality is an important theme in the novel. As Ryan states, “gender inequality is sustained by culture” (132). For example, he brings up religions with patriarchal structures, in which women are not allowed to participate in public activities like men, or with them. Traditionally they were, and in some cases still are, supposed to take care of domestic labour. In *The Bluest Eye* most women are portrayed as taking care of households and families while men are working outside of the home. In the Breedlove family however, Pauline works in a white household, taking better care of that than her own home and family. Cholly also fails in his patriarchal responsibilities because of his drinking and attempt to burn down the family house, thus leaving the entire family “outdoors”, something that was considered: “the real terror of life. To be slack enough to put oneself outdoors, or heartless enough to put one’s own kin outdoors – that was criminal” (Morrison 15).

Another example of gender inequality is that women in Western mythology and philosophy, were often associated with madness, danger and inability to control their feelings or desires. Men, on the other hand, were controlled, reasonable and independent (Ryan 132). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, that women “are depicted either as monster or angels in the male literary tradition” (Gilbert & Gubar 596). They argue that female writers have to understand the impact male writers have had on our perception of beauty. Feminist criticism today is partially a product of the second wave of the American feminist movement during the 1960s. It had literary overtones since its advocates pointed out the importance of showing the injustices women faced and especially how they were portrayed in literature. By using literature as a means authors could influence the readers and thus provide an alternative view on women (Barry 116). According to Peter Barry, feminists wanted to point out that earlier literature often portrayed heroines whose only aim in life was to marry, which would then make them happy and fulfilled. The feminist criticism written in the beginning of the 1970s wished to include women’s writing by including women writers in the history of literature. (117) Barry also claims that Anglo-American feminist

criticism is more prone to take interest in a realistic look on literature, where women's lives and experiences are valued (119). *The Bluest Eye* reveals the struggles women face in their community, and how many of them despise themselves for both being black and female. Morrison's novel concerns the challenges girls like Pecola and Claudia and even women like Pauline are facing when trying to adapt to a society in which they are not included. This struggle is closely linked to what CRT-scholars call intersectionality, a term used to explain how different forms of discrimination can overlap, or intersect. Thus, *The Bluest Eye* highlights a society where intersectionality is shown through describing Pecola's abject conditions as well as Claudia's defiance.

Literary criticism

There have been numerous articles written about Toni Morrison and her novels. Many of them focus on racism and oppression as well as the problems people face when trying to adapt in a society in which they are being ostracised or diminished. In her article "Incestuous Rape, Abjection, and the Colonization of Psychic Space in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night*", Emy Koopman deals with the problems of associating rape and incest as a metaphor for colonisation. Koopman states that "In *The Bluest Eye*, African American Cholly Breedlove's rape of his own daughter, as well as her response to it, are associated with the humiliation that comes with being black in a racist society" (Koopman 304). She wonders why it would be logical to become an incestuous rapist simply because one is colonised. In my essay I will argue that a person's past could be a prediction of the future, in that traumas we experience as children could lead to disastrous behaviour later in life.

Another author who has written about the problems black people face in the United States is Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber. In her book *Race, Trauma and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison* she describes the cultural heritage of trauma and self-loathing created by slavery. According to her, children in these novels act out their frustration by showing aggression, thus trying to get a better self-image (Schreiber 66). One example of trying to improve self-image is when the community in *The Bluest Eye* gossips about the Breedlove family and their shortcomings in order to try feeling better about themselves. Schreiber also brings up the fact that Claudia MacTeer understands that the gossip and humiliating treatment of the Breedlove family is a projection of the community's self-loathing: "We tried to see her

without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her". (Morrison 202). Schreiber then discusses beauty ideals and how the black community judges people depending on how white-looking they are, the whiter the better. Thus, the descendants of slaves maintain the ideals of their former masters.

Another text I will refer to is "Female Subjectivity, Sexual Violence, and the American Nation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", by Melissa R. Sande. Here the author focuses on gender issues as well as sexual violence. Sande claims that the way Pecola is being ostracised by her community after the rape is a reflection of the way the black community is discriminated against by society. She argues that while white women were fighting for their rights in the 1960s, black women had to fight both white and black men, thus being "doubly oppressed" (Sande). Her discussion may serve as an example of how the overlapping of identities impact the way black women experience oppression, according to intersectionality theory. Since my focus will be on racism, beauty, trauma and self-hatred, it is interesting to follow Sande's discussion about how Morrison questions a faulty system by focusing on a girl who would normally be both ignored and marginalized, thereby generating a lot of sympathy. When studying the novel I will look deeper into the different aspects of oppression described by the writers mentioned above. Using the work of these scholars, I will also look at reasons for self-hatred and its origin as described by scholars such as Koopman and Schreiber and refer to their theories when analysing the novel.

Racial aspects of ugliness and beauty

We are all the sum of our collective backgrounds. When growing up in an environment where one's heritage includes feelings of exclusion from the normative culture it can be difficult not to incorporate those feelings into one's personal history. In this section I will discuss how racial discrimination can affect not only one person's life but a whole community's.

In Morrison's novel it is obvious that white standards of beauty are passed down through generations of people, from Pauline to her daughter Pecola and from Mrs. MacTeer to her daughter Claudia. Being raised with Dick and Jane primers as well as movies featuring good-looking, happy and successful white families, those who do not fit into the pattern will automatically feel ostracised. Pecola, who has been told she is ugly her entire life, accepts the knowledge she is not beautiful, a feeling inherited from her mother, a woman who has long

since accepted her own ugliness and equated it with her blackness. Even when compared with Maureen Peal, who has six fingers on each hand and a dog tooth, Pecola is considered uglier simply by virtue of having a darker skin. Not surprisingly, she starts believing in the depreciatory words. Pecola believes her way to escape her miserable situation is to get blue eyes, hoping her parents as well as the society, would change if she became prettier. “If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs Breedlove too” (44). However, this wish only makes her even more conscious of other peoples’ rejection of her. Pecola’s dream of getting blue eyes has to be seen as the result of her community’s and the society’s inability to see beauty in a black girl. If white standards are all there is on which to base a sense of beauty, and if being white equals being beautiful and black is a lack of whiteness, then being black must be ugly. Blue eyes thus become a symbol of whiteness and beauty and the lack thereof means ugliness. This division is what Morrison describes in *Playing in the Dark* where she brings up the concepts of American Africanism, and its constructed persona.

According to Schreiber, children in Morrison’s novels “learn about American culture, their black communities, and their own self-worth through the legacy of racial discrimination” (Schreiber 65). In *The Bluest Eye*, this is shown when Claudia destroys her white, blue-eyed doll, which the adults think she should be very fond of. Claudia however, only feels bewildered and revolted by the doll, and wonders what they expect her to do with it (Morrison 18). Contrary to their better judgement, parents pass on white ideals to their children without questioning whether this could be wrong or not. Claudia’s reaction is, on the other hand, both understandable and logical since she cannot identify with the white doll. In *Bloom’s Guide: Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye*, Harold Bloom writes that Claudia MacTeer’s hatred towards white dolls as well as white girls is addressed (35). The article states that Claudia has to accept the Shirley Temple ideals everyone else is celebrating, or she will end up with problems, calling it “adjustment without improvement” (Morrison 21). Those white baby-dolls remind Claudia of her own inadequacy. Adults do not look at her with a smile, thinking how cute she is, as they do girls like Shirley Temple. Thus, being a strong-minded girl who has not yet learned the social codes and doctrines that white is better than black, destroying dolls becomes her way of showing resistance against unattainable ideals (Bloom 35).

Another scene where Claudia’s anger is shown is when the MacTeer sisters are walking with Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl, to an ice-cream shop. Maureen is always

surrounded by boys and even though she has six fingers on her hand and a “dog tooth”, she is considered more beautiful than anyone else because of her fair skin. Even the adults treat her differently compared to other coloured children. The difference becomes apparent when the girls find Pecola being bullied by some boys, who are shouting out: “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked” (Morrison 63). The fact that the boys are themselves black is an example of their own feeling of inadequacy and self-hatred and their bullying Pecola is their way of trying to handling their frustration. Pecola becomes a scapegoat for her classmates’ contempt for their own blackness: “They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds – cooled – and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path” (63).

After Frieda MacTeer has chased the boys away, Maureen first shows an interest in Pecola but soon starts asking her questions that go along the same lines as the boys’ chanting. Claudia is very upset when Maureen refers to Pecola’s father as “her old black daddy” (71) and tries to hit Maureen who runs away shouting that she really is cute, although the MacTeer sisters say she is not. It dawns on Claudia that if Maureen is cute, then they cannot be. She then draws the conclusion that they are inferior to girls with whiter skin, no matter how smart or nice they are (72). Instead they will end up like Pecola, who embodies all the fear and self-hatred the boys are pouring over her. In *The Bluest Eye* even the candy has pictures of pretty white people: “Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. /.../ She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (48). Pecola’s fascination with the candy is preceded by her encounter with the shopkeeper Mr Yacobski, who ignores her completely when she enters his store. Instead of letting her anger and frustration spin out of control she turns it in on herself and becomes introverted, concentrating on the candy, thus enhancing her feelings of self-loathing.

Claudia’s anger can be juxtaposed with Pecola’s envy and longing for the ideal of whiteness that is described in the novel and the situation above. The girls, and especially Pecola, are fond of watching movies with white actresses like Shirley Temple or Greta Garbo, as is Pecola’s mother, who particularly admires Jean Harlow with her platinum-blond hair. Not surprisingly those ideals come from the white, well-to-do middle class that the media wants to promote.

The contrast between white standards and the reality African Americans experience in the novel has been described by Schreiber. According to her, people in *The Bluest Eye* repeat their past by inheriting the “traumatic residue” from slavery, thus subordinating to what is called a “master signifier”:

” The structure of racial difference is founded on a master signifier – Whiteness- that produces a logic of differential logic (...) the unconscious signifier Whiteness, which founds the logic of racial difference, promises wholeness. (...) What guarantees Whiteness its place as a master signifier is visual difference. The phenotype secures our belief in racial difference, thereby perpetuating our desire for Whiteness” (20-21).

To emphasise the difference and the standards of white middle-class society the novel begins with a reference to an old childhood primer, Dick and Jane: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy.” (1) The primer exemplifies the standards of the white American family: a house, mother, father, two children and a picket fence, all happy, clean, safe and secure in a well-to-do middle-class family. Pecola’s life is nothing like this; where there is love in both the Dick and Jane primer as well as in the Macteer household, there is little love or affection shown in the Breedlove family, although the very name of the family, Breed-love, would suggest otherwise. The word “breed” is a sinister reminder of what happens to Pecola in the end. The family lives in a storefront because of their poverty and their blackness, and they stay there since they believe they do not deserve a better life. “/.../they stayed there because they believed they were ugly /.../their ugliness was unique” (36). This is a depressing example of Delgado’s theory that minority groups will be influenced by the mindset of ingroups, thus eventually believing they deserve to stay at the bottom.

Pecola grows up with the knowledge she is both black and ugly, something her own mother says after giving birth: “Lord she was ugly” (124). Pauline’s self-loathing is transferred to her daughter. By rejecting her daughter, she distances herself from her own feelings of not belonging to the pretty white family and thus passes on a feeling of worthlessness to her daughter. To Pecola, the only thing that can save her is blue eyes. Morrison gives us an opportunity to feel pity and perhaps even sympathy for Pecola and her situation, thus raising questions about “ugliness”. Do we feel guilt or shame when confronted

with our own prejudices? According to Delgado: “minority children exhibit self-hatred because of their color, and majority children learn to associate dark skin with undesirability and ugliness” (Delgado 134). He also emphasises that children subject to racial insults face lasting mental and emotional damage (134). By seeing the ugliness through a child’s eyes we are more affected and do not have the same tendency to excuse the culprit. It shows us how vulnerable a child may be when exposed to criticism, thus demonstrating its impact on Pecola and, to some extent, ourselves.

To some extent Pecola’s belief that the family does not deserve a better life may stem from her mother, Pauline, who has felt rejection and unworthiness on account of her crooked foot ever since a nail pierced and damaged the limb. After having met Cholly Breedlove and moving in search of jobs, she still feels like an outsider. She finds it hard to make friends and she misses her family, and she is overwhelmed by the presence of so many white people in the town of Lorain, Ohio. Pauline explains: ” I weren’t used to so much white folks. The ones I seed before was something hateful, but they didn’t come around too much. /.../ But up north they was everywhere – next door, downstairs, all over the streets – and colored folks few and far between” (115). Pauline tries her best to fit in but she feels the other black women do not accept her. She recalls: “Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness” (115). Thus, in an attempt to look more like the other women and after having fought with Cholly about money to buy her new clothes, Pauline starts working to earn money of her own. And, even more importantly, she goes to the movies to watch her idols, who are all white, and after that she has a hard time not judging people by their appearances. When her husband starts drinking more and not contributing to the household, Pauline finds a job in a white household. Having to work and not being able to stay at home to take care of her children and her house is seen as being a bad mother and wife by her community. Being able to be a housewife and be supported by a husband is another ideal imposed on women, and men, through white middle-class norms. “The fact that she is compelled to choose between her husband and her work represents a state in which the black woman is seen as an economic slave by the dominant white society”, according to Maher (47).

When Pauline loses a tooth in the cinema she feels even more ugly and when her children are born she has problems showing them any affection, as she feels she has passed on her ugliness and worthlessness. Her escape is in the white household where she becomes the ideal servant and keeps everything in order. Here she has the life she cannot live

in her own home or with her family. The daughter in the family she serves gives Pauline a nickname: Polly. Thus she is diminished even by the youngest family member in the Fisher household. Interestingly, Pauline shows the white girl more affection than she is able to show her own children. Instead she projects her feelings of inferiority to her children. “Them she bent toward respectability, and in so doing taught them fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s” (Morrison 126). While working in the beautiful house of the Fisher family, bathing the Fisher girl in a porcelain tub, she cannot help but holding her husband Cholly “like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross” (Morrison 125). The abundance of soap bars and shiny pots and pans becomes Pauline’s secret world of which she is able to imagine she is part of the white world. Surrounding herself with these beautiful things she can pretend she is not part of the “other” world, where poverty and ugliness rule. Her work is her world and her distance from her own family grows.

Another character in the novel to whom appearance is important is Geraldine. She is a black middle-class woman who makes it clear to her son Junior that she “did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers...colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 85). Geraldine desperately tries to uphold her appearance as being superior to the rest of the black community. In “Girls into Women: Culture, Nature and Self-loathing in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*”, Barbara Frey Waxman describes Geraldine’s efforts as building a clean nest for her family. “She sanitizes out of herself not only her blackness but also her sexuality, and there is just enough maternal affection remaining in her to nurture a pet cat” (48). Interestingly, to both Geraldine and Pauline blackness is associated with dirtiness. However, though Geraldine makes Junior wear clean clothes and washes him all the time, it has little effect; Junior is shunned by white children and ridiculed by black ones. Feeling rejected by the white community, he turns his anger towards other children, and in particular girls. Pecola is bullied by Junior, who one day lures her into his house. When Geraldine finds Pecola in her house she is devastated. She feels everything that has to do with the blackness she resents and fears has taken over her house. Morrison uses Geraldine’s behaviour as a distinct reminder of the extent of internalised and intra-racial racism in the black community.

Examples given from the novel clearly state that growing up in a community where racial aspects on beauty as well as feelings of self-hatred to some extent is inherited.

This is exemplified in both Pecola's feeling of inferiority, stemming from her parents' neglect and their own experiences, as well as Claudia's revolt against white standards.

Gender and sexuality

Maher M. Mahdi writes in the article "Triangle of Hatred: Sexism, Racism and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" that "the dilemma of the African American woman is based on racial and sexist oppression that constantly marginalizes her where she is confined in a pitiful state of nothingness" (45). He continues by stating that although many voices have been raised for the rights of white women, very few voices have been raised when it comes to black women - although this is changing today, owing in part to advocates like Toni Morrison. Both black and white women suffer from oppression by men but black women also suffer from oppression due to their skin colour. This double oppression becomes an obstacle in their lives. This is something Morrison tries to highlight in her novel and according to Mahdi, "Morrison does not only blame the white society for oppression against the black woman, but she also criticizes the sexism practiced by black men against their women. The tragedy of black women is, therefore, caused by white racism and black sexism as well" (Mahdi 46).

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* Gilbert and Gubar describe how women in literature are often portrayed as either mad or angelic. In *The Bluest Eye* madness is manifested in the insanity Pecola suffers from in the end of the novel. Her madness however is neither angelic nor demonic, but a result of the humiliation and scorn Pecola has encountered throughout her life. The only way to survive is to escape into an existence where she is no longer a victim but merely exists. The words Claudia utters towards the end of the novel about their community having washed their own ugliness to cleanse themselves is evidence for how self-hatred can manifest itself as dissociation from inadequacy and feelings of inferiority. By directing their hatred towards the little girl they can feel more beautiful

themselves and hide their own self-loathing, both for not intervening when they ought to have and also for their own fear of being ostracised and victims of their society's rejection and contempt. Although there are not many white women portrayed in *The Bluest Eye*, they have a huge impact on the black women and their society through the mere influence they have through movies and through their belonging in the ruling class. Not surprisingly, young women wish to be like the unobtainable stars on the screen.

Sande refers to an essay by Estelle B. Fredman that states that rape was racialized in the late 19th century, depicting black men as violent rapists who targeted white women and girls. Little was mentioned about white men committing such crimes and this crime was mostly considered a phenomenon within the black community. According to the press in those days, the general opinion portrayed "white men as exceptional rapists but black men as natural predators" (Sande). Sande also argues that labelling black men as unable to control their actions and feelings would further the black community's exclusion from the rest of the society. However, that humiliation and race-based poverty often leads to violence, domestic abuse and other crimes is no wonder and can often be both understood and to some extent even extenuated. After Cholly has been rejected by his father, he understands he is all alone and able to be in charge of his own life: "Cholly was free. Dangerously free. Free to feel whatever he felt – fear, guilt, shame, love, grief, pity. Free to be tender or violent, to whistle or weep" (Morrison 157). This could be interpreted as Cholly being deprived of all normal feelings and not having to be held responsible for his actions. Later he tragically becomes the stereotype by enacting sexual violence.

Cholly's drinking and sexual abuse is to some extent explained by his childhood experiences: "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (130). Later in life his father rejects him as well. An important scene explaining Cholly's later anger towards women is when Cholly is having sex with a girl in an orchard during his grandmother's funeral. Suddenly two white men appear, shining a flashlight on the young couple. Instead of trying to chase the young lovers away they order Cholly to continue with the act. "'Get on with it, nigger", said the flashlight one. /.../ I said get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good'" (146). Thus, Cholly is diminished in both the eyes of these white men and also in his own eyes. Instead of turning his anger towards the men, he projects his frustration and humiliation onto the young girl. Darlene, who has both witnessed and also been a victim of the humiliation and degradation Cholly feels, embodies his sense of unworthiness. Instead of

feeling sorry for her he wants to kill her. That Cholly has been left or rejected by everyone around him also means he has never learnt how to behave in a relationship or how to express affection. The anger Cholly keeps inside can later be what makes him violent and can explain his treatment of women and why he rapes his own daughter, Pecola. When ridiculed and emasculated as a teenager he becomes confused about his sexuality and looks at women with disgust. Cholly may initially be regarded as hating women but it may also be possible to interpret his behaviour as an inability to react productively to emotions and therefore using (often violent) sex as a surrogate, although Pauline describes their lovemaking as initially passionate. However, one also may feel some sympathy towards this man who has never felt loved and in some ways is a victim like his wife and daughter. Still, trying to explain away the worst thinkable crime by blaming earlier traumas is to evade the responsibility one has as a partner or parent.

When Cholly sees his daughter scratch her leg with her toes, just like her mother used to do, Cholly confuses his tender affections with sex and instead of protecting his daughter he commits one of the worst crimes anyone can commit. The scene in which he rapes Pecola described Cholly as feeling both hatred and tenderness: “Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbour of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness” (Morrison 161). There are no signs of remorse though. And herein lies a problem: are we supposed to sympathize with Cholly Breedlove and thereby excuse his crime? Should abandonment and oppression always be considered an explanation to loathsome incestuous behaviour? Emy Koopman raises the question in her text “Incestuous rape, abjection, and the colonization of psychic space in *Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye* and Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night*”. Here she points out that:

”It needs to be remembered that the relation between colonizer and colonized is perverted from the beginning, while the parent-child relation (ideally) starts out with a positive identity distinction, which dissolves as soon as the parental love turns into sexual desire. While the colonized can bring out the flaws in the colonial discourse, what flaws in which discourse could the incest victim bring out? The difference is that colonization is a structural, social process, while incest remains the ultimate taboo, the exception, practically mystified in its unspeakability” (11-12).

Koopman also mentions the scene in which Cholly Breedlove is having sex with Darlene and is interrupted by the white men who call him “nigger” and “coon”. Koopman states that this is an example of a “double rape” (306) since Cholly ends up raping the girl, an act that however started off as consensual sex, and he himself is “raped” by the white men, thus leaving Cholly with a sense of total helplessness. This would explain Cholly’s rape of his own daughter as a repetition of the humiliation he experienced, though that act is described as mixing tenderness with violence. Koopman continues by stating that Morrison’s description of Cholly’s background explains how he could become an incestuous rapist and to some extent accept it as a logical consequence: “The rape functions to show how humiliation is transmitted through generations, but also brings out the extent of this humiliation: if racism makes someone commit the ultimate transgression of incest, then it must truly be horrific. Incestuous rape, in its capacity to evoke horror and shock, is thus applied functionally to abject racism itself” (Koopman 306).

Koopman concludes that Pecola’s absolute lack of power makes her especially vulnerable to exploitation: “Her reaction to the rape is striking: she does not rebel against her family or against society. Instead she invokes the help of a “magician”, a man of mixed blood called “Soaphead Church” (307). The character Soaphead Church is also described as a child molester. The omniscient narrator describes him as a man who loves things, but detests people. Church is “a Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams” (Morrison 163) and as such he is able to take advantage of those who are in need of sympathy. His intentions however are not good. He loathes body odours and physical flaws, so he turns his attention to little girls, since they are not as offensive. “They were usually manageable and frequently seductive” (Morrison 164). Church also had a harsh upbringing and was often a victim of his father’s violence which led to “a hatred of, and fascination with, any hint of disorder or decay” (Morrison 167). He is later left by his wife and when he eventually settles in Lorain, he calls himself a minister and his good manners impress the people in his community. His rejection of women is mistaken for celibacy and people find him supernatural (Morrison 169).

Interestingly, although being a character with religious beliefs he appears to be one of the most hypocritical and immoral characters in the story. He does not take sexual advantage of Pecola; however, by making her believe and trust in him, he is guilty in a moral sense. In a letter to God, he expresses his feelings towards Pecola and other little girls, explaining to God that he did not lay a finger on Pecola but that he did God’s job when he

gave her blue eyes. He also writes that when he dies, he will miss the girls: “The little girls are the only things I’ll miss. /.../ Playful, I felt, and friendly. Not like the newspapers said. Not like the people whispered. And they didn’t mind at all” (Morrison 179). Today, we would call his actions grooming, since by being eloquent and paying the children attention he can lure them into doing what he wants. Church however, seems unaware of the damage he is causing. The aftermath of Pecola’s visit to Church’s is however what finally pushes her over the edge.

Trauma and self-loathing

Racialized notions of beauty and the double oppression black women face can have destructive effects. J. Brooks Bouson writes in *Embodied Shame: Uncovering Female Shame in Contemporary Women's Writings* about the issues of intra-racial prejudice and the harm racial self-loathing has on Pecola (53). When “having internalised the contempt and loathing directed at them from the shaming gaze of the humiliator- that is the white culture” (Bouson 54), the victims internalise the racism. Bouson also describes how Pecola is progressively traumatised due to feeling shame both for being black and also for being a victim of her “crippled and crippling” family (55). Morrison has chosen to emphasise the family’s abjection by letting the Breedlove family be talked about in third person narrative while the MacTeer family in first person. Noteworthy, is also Pecola’s dialogues with herself towards the end of the novel where she uses both a first and second person voice. The family members’ emotional distance from one another is exemplified by the fact that Pecola calls her mother Mrs Breedlove, not mother.

The white doll Claudia’s parents give her on her birthday represents everything they think is beautiful. Claudia however, is unable to see the desirability of it. “Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs – all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every child treasured. ‘Here’, they said, this is beautiful, and you are on this day “worthy” you may have it” (19). While Claudia becomes angry and tries to rebel against the white standards that are imposed on her, Pecola becomes introvert and resigned, quietly increasing her self-hatred. Her final humiliation is when she in

the end is carrying her father's child and she does not receive any sympathy from the community, rather the opposite. They gossip about her and her family and question the background of the Breedlove family, stating that no one in that family could be "right anyhow" (187) and expect the baby to be stillborn. They say: "She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking". "Can't help but be. Ought to be law: two ugly people doubling up like that make more ugly. Be better off in the ground" (188). Eventually Pecola goes mad and retreats into her inner world she has the blue eyes she was longing for.

Closely linked to feelings of ugliness is bodily shame. According to Bouson, Pecola's body language reveals her shame and humiliation: "the eyes are averted and downcast, the head droops, and the shoulders slump" (Bouson 56). Claudia, on the other hand wants Pecola to assume a different posture when Maureen is shouting at them: "She seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets" (Morrison 71-72). Pecola's mother Pauline also has a deep-rooted body shame which stems from her own neglected childhood and her shame over not looking like the white moviestars. Trying to make her daughter "respectable", Pauline teaches Pecola to be fearful of being clumsy or being like her father - in other words: inadequate. These lessons are consolidated through beating: "into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (Morrison 126). Pecola's answer to this miserable plight is to withdraw, trying to make herself invisible. According to Bouson, dealing with "body shame by disappearing also marks the beginning of her experiences of depersonalization: that is her estrangement from the world and self" (Bouson 62). Not surprisingly, all the shame and humiliation Pecola is exposed to finally results in her shutting out other people and the outer world. Claudia describes Pecola's appearance: "after the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. She was so sad to see. (...) The damage done was total" (Morrison 202). There is no consolation to expect from Pecola's mother either. Pauline also uses whiteness as a basis for comparison and is unable to show her affection, instead she joins in with the society's disgust and isolation of Pecola. Mrs Breedlove's ostensibly indifferent attitude about the rape may also contribute to Pecola's insanity.

Conclusion

Self-hatred is immensely destructive. It is not something one is born with but something that can be acquired through the years depending on the care of, or lack thereof, provided by one's family, surroundings or society's treatment or opposing standards. In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola feels neither loved nor accepted and it has a heart-breaking effect on her. Her story is unfortunately not unique, as numerous children suffer from rejection because of their skin colour, gender or any other factors brought about by social inequalities. As in many other cases the community where Pecola lives never intervenes although they most likely are fully aware of the unsatisfactory state of things in the Breedlove family. Referring back to Critical Race Theory, differences in social standards and micro-aggressions contribute to oppression and a sense of inferiority. Another result of belonging to an outgroup is the internalised racism which makes people believe they are inferior to others. Such a devastating view of the self can have an appalling effect on a child. To some extent this could explain why Pecola accepts becoming a scapegoat for all shortcomings everyone around her experiences, from racism to neglect and abuse. When internalising feelings of shame, neglect and powerlessness, she can act as the embodiment of other people's feelings of inferiority.

Not feeling beautiful enough is unfortunately still an issue in our society but when combining that with the feeling of inferiority because of the colour of one's skin, it is no wonder it has devastating effects on young girls. After Pecola's father rapes her and she later carries his child the defeat is complete; there is no hope for her. She becomes more introverted and her self-hatred eventually drives her insane. She deals with her nightmare in her own way, by withdrawing from reality. Toni Morrison writes in her afterword that Pecola "is not seen by herself until she hallucinates a self" (211). It sums up how "unseen" the girl is, both by others and herself. Pecola's self-hatred is the result of a life of not being seen as the beautiful girl she is, not having any hope of a better life nor feeling loved by anyone. Since Pecola keeps wandering aimlessly in the outskirts of the town after she has become insane, she remains a symbol of their cruelty towards her and their own suppressed feelings.

In my essay I have analysed the effects of a disastrous childhood and how they manifest in the lives of the different characters in *The Bluest Eye*. They all have experienced feelings of inferiority due to racism or neglect, but they react in different ways. Although

longing to fit in to the standards of the community, Claudia MacTeer feels more anger than resignation. She deals with it by destroying her dolls and attacking Maureen Peal. Pecola on the other hand seems to shrink and submit to her circumstances whenever bad things occur. Her parents have also used the same strategy, although in different ways. Pauline escapes to her work, where she can focus on the beauty of the white family's household. Where she fails keeping high standards in her own house she can put all her energy into the Fisher household, even showing more affection towards their daughter than her own. Pauline states that she pushes all her emotions about her family away but that sometimes she misses feeling affection towards her husband but has managed to neglect those memories: "I don't recollect it much anymore" (Morrison 129). However, it is hard to believe any mother could behave like Pauline without feeling remorseful and ashamed. One way of dealing with shame is to suppress those feelings though they are likely to manifest themselves in different ways in the end, one of which is self-loathing.

Cholly Breedlove actually seems to understand, to some extent, the consequences of his actions when he looks at his daughter after the rape: "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her" (161). His self-hatred is shown in his alcohol abuse as well as in his abusive behaviour towards his wife and family. All he does concludes with the ultimate humiliation, the incestuous rape. When reading the novel one cannot help but wondering where the fault really lies. Are Cholly's earlier experiences to blame or is it, as Koopman argues, a result of being doubly oppressed? Morrison, however, is not excusing rape. She is showing us that African American girls - as well as men- in the story, and society at large, are not only victims of racism but also available victims of abuse since their self-contempt prevents them from expecting better treatment. They receive no understanding or sympathy from families or society, rather the contrary; Pauline beats Pecola after the rape, as if it is her fault. Even though the community knows about the rape and the abuse, nobody mentions it, thus leaving Pecola and those like her no other way out than through insanity.

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