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# Introspection and Self-Transformation: Empathy in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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**T**he ability to connect with and feel empathy for others is an innate quality within ourselves that serves to make each of us human. We empathize with the poor, homeless, and the less fortunate. Empathy drives us to do good for others; it allows us to make a difference in the world in which we live. In her novel *The Bluest Eye* the unfortunate situations and experiences in which Toni Morrison places her characters force readers to place themselves in the characters situation and grapple with the examination of oneself as a result. Moral essayist Samuel Johnson once wrote, "All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination that realizes the event however fictitious... by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortune we contemplate, so that we feel... whatever emotions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves" (Johnson 204). Toni Morrison, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, uses the empathy she evokes from her readers as a tool to teach audiences a lesson about the evils of internalized racism, lack of empathy, and rape.

People often confuse empathy with pity. Whereas sympathy is used to make readers identify with characters, feeling only pity would be a contrite and lazy reading of this text. In her research on cross-racial empathy, Kimberly Chabot Davis clearly states: "Sympathy and compassion are regularly equated with a condescending form of pity, a selfish and cruel wallowing in the misfortunes of others" (Chabot Davis 400). However, Morrison does not create her characters in such a way that you are meant to simply feel sympathy for their tragic situations and then move on with your life. Instead, Morrison evokes empathy not only to engage the reader but also to implicate the reader as well—that is, to pull the reader into the text. Again, Samuel Johnson sheds light on the workings of empathy: "Our passions are therefore more strongly moved, in proportion as we can more readily adopt the pains or pleasures proposed to our minds, by recognizing them as once our own, or considering them as naturally incident in our state of life" (Johnson 204). Morrison relies on the reader's ability to understand and associate with each character so that the reader may approach and view the work differently. Davis points out that "While empathy could be seen as a type of sympathy, empathy usually signifies a stronger element of identification... imaginatively experiencing the feelings, thoughts and situation of another" (Davis 403). There is power in making audiences acknowledge both the wrongs of society and the nature of wrongness in and of itself. Davis reports that one "... reader of *The Bluest Eye*

was moved to self-interrogation and to question her previously uncompassionate and personally disengaged reading of the text” (Davis 409). Morrison did not create *The Bluest Eye* as a vehicle for garnering pity for poor helpless Pecola, but rather as a means of educating audiences on the unfortunate side effects of internalized racism, lack of empathy for one another, and the power of looking at a situation from multiple viewpoints.

Within the novel, readers witness Morrison’s efforts at addressing the issue of African American individuals’ common desire for Caucasian attributes in the 1940’s. What is interesting about this novel is the way Morrison manages to present Claudia, the work’s narrator. Claudia, the youngest character within the work, seems wholly unaffected by society’s affinity for all things white. Claudia explains, “I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche...what I felt at that time was unsullied hatred...for all the Shirley Temples of the world” (Morrison 19). Claudia serves as Morrison’s ideal of what a typical African American should exemplify. Claudia cultivates her loathing of what everyone around her seems to strive for, and therefore cannot understand the beauty people see in the blond haired, blue-eyed doll she is presented with for Christmas. Claudia says:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made...to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls...all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured (Morrison 20).

Claudia is subsequently outraged by society’s high regard for white culture, and questions what gives white qualities such power and desirability within her African American community. While Claudia is questioning society’s collective desire for white attributes in order to be beautiful, Morrison chastises readers and African American society for not being able to find the beautiful within themselves as a race, thus directly implicating us all in the demise of Pecola Breedlove.

Claudia is the inverse to this work’s main character, Pecola Breedlove. Pecola longs for big, blue eyes, set in a dark-skinned face, in hopes that they will make her beautiful. Evident from the text, Pecola is ostensibly plagued by many of the stereotypical physical characteristics one may associate with African Americans. From her irregular hairline, to her wide, crooked nose, Pecola is the embodiment of African American physiognomy. Both Claudia and Pecola become the tools with which Morrison delves into the recesses of internalized racism. Internalized racism is when a person actively and knowingly discriminates against a member of their own race, and

experiences a tacit or perhaps explicit revulsion for one’s own race, fostered by the society in which the novel takes place. Because the community in Lorain yearns for white characteristics, they make an example of Pecola and associate her with their idea of ugliness. Morrison writes, “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (Morrison 45). It is society’s lack of adoration and reverence for Pecola’s apparent black characteristics that makes the child long for white attributes. Critic Marc Conner concludes by citing Toni Morrison’s own words:

Indeed, the community is part of the very cause for Pecola’s pathetic desire for blue eyes...Morrison has stated that the reason for Pecola’s desire must be at least partially traced to the failure’s of Pecola’s own community: ‘...she wanted to have blue eyes and she wanted to be Shirley Temple...because of the society in which she lived and, very importantly, because of the black people who helped her want to be that. (The responsibilities are ours. It’s our responsibility for her helping her believe, helping her come to the point where she wanted that.)’ (Conner 56)

The empathy readers feel on Pecola’s behalf calls attention to the lack of emphasis African Americans put in the loveliness and beauty of their own cultural and physical attributes. By educating audiences on the evils of internalized racism, Morrison is provoking readers to find beauty within themselves as well. Through Pecola, we witness a tragedy and in doing so, we are encouraged to acknowledge that true beauty is found first within oneself, not in the cultural attributes of anyone else.

In the novel’s “Afterword,” Morrison gives some insight into what inspired her to create this piece of literature. Here Morrison describes a childhood encounter with a friend who sincerely expressed her intense desire for blue eyes, a request that deeply troubled and distressed Morrison. She explains: “Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later I was still wondering about how one learns that...Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?” (Morrison 210). Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is a concept that drives this novel; it is not simply a frivolous episode within the text, as Haskel Frankel has claimed. Frankel, in his article, writes:

...what she wants are blue eyes. In this scene, in which a young black on verge of madness seeks beauty and happiness in a wish for white girl’s eyes, the author makes her most telling statement on the tragic effect

of race prejudice on children. But the scene occurs late in the novel—far too late to achieve the impact it might have had in a different construction...[Pecola's] mental breakdown when it comes, has only the impact of reportage. (Frankel 3)

Frankel is of course referring to the encounter between Pecola and Soaphead Church that comes three quarters of the way through this novel. However, Frankel's opinion that this scene comes too far along into the novel is absurd. Audiences are made aware of Pecola's wish long before her interlude with Church. Specifically, readers recognize this occurring when the omniscient narrator informs audiences, "Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes" (Morrison 46). It is Pecola's impossible desire for blue eyes, as a result of the cruelty she tolerates throughout this novel, which leads her to seek aid from Soaphead Church. If this scene had occurred anywhere else within the text, it would have altered readers' ability to realize how desperate Pecola truly was. The empathy audiences experience on Pecola's behalf comes to a climax upon the realization that Pecola has sought out the help of a known pedophile in order to satisfy her desire.

Also, the notion that Pecola's breakdown only has the impact of reporting is faulty reasoning. *If* that were the case, Morrison simply could have elected to have Claudia narrate to audiences Pecola's eventual descent into madness. Morrison however, elected to include the chapter with the primer, "LookLookHereComesAFriend..." throughout which audiences are given a conversation between Pecola and her imagined alter ego. Within this portion of the text audiences observe a mentally unbalanced Pecola, who has ultimately slipped into insanity in order to truly acquire her blue eyes. If Morrison had simply informed readers of Pecola's demise, without giving some insight into Pecola's frame of mind, Morrison would have been letting readers off the hook too easily. The empathy audiences feel for Pecola during this haunting portion of the text, serves to make readers truly aware of the devastating effects racism, abuse, and intolerance can have, and reader's ignorance regarding such matters implicates them as having shared a part in this young girl's downfall.

As mentioned earlier, internalized racism is implicated as playing a part in Pecola's undoing; however, black society's lack of empathy for their members is also a cause that merits further examination. The very same society that is supposed to sustain and support Pecola, upon learning of her rape and pregnancy, ultimately turns its back on her. The only two characters within the text to exhibit any empathy on Pecola's behalf are Claudia and Frieda. Claudia explains, "Our astonishment was short-lived, for it gave way to a curious kind of defensive shame; we

were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally we just felt sorry for her. And I believe our sorrow was all the more intense because nobody else seemed to share it" (Morrison 190). As a reader, we experience anger and disbelief that any society would act in such a way. However, it happens everyday. A community gossiping about one another is certainly not a new trend; nevertheless it's society's lack of action in Pecola's defense that is being criticized here. Critic Marc Connor accurately states, "Pecola is destroyed within her very community; and that community not only fails to aid her, they have helped cause her isolation" (Connor 55). The Lorain society's lack of empathy for one another serves as Morrison's means of making audiences aware of the comfort community can afford to its members and the acknowledgment that everyone has the responsibility to aid, rather than ridicule, a member of their own community.

Empathy garnered on behalf of a rapist seems like a hard case to sell; however Morrison manages it. Morrison could have written a stereotypical rape scene for audiences where Cholly sadistically dominates young Pecola and savagely rapes her. Yet she elects not to. Morrison, in her "Afterword" explains, "I did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed Pecola and contributed to her collapse" (Morrison 211). In the chapter headed with the primer, "SeeFatherHeIsBigAndStrong..." in which the rape of Pecola is finally witnessed, the entire chapter is narrated from Cholly's point of view, thereby offering Cholly's thoughts and experiences. By relating to audiences Cholly's past, Morrison is attempting to both humanize Cholly as well as implicate his past as having a distinct responsibility in the heinous act that Cholly commits against Pecola. It is important to note that Morrison makes reference to Cholly's first sexual encounter with Darlene, where he is ordered to continue having sexual relations with Darlene while the white hunters gather round and watch him perform, before readers see the incestual rape. The hate and anger Cholly feels during this first episode, which should be directed at the hunters, is instead turned on Darlene. Morrison then chooses to parallel Cholly's feelings of hate during his Darlene episode again with those he feels during Cholly's rape of Pecola. Cholly expresses:

"Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet...What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slided in his stomach and threatened to become vomit...Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her."(Morrison 161-3)

Morrison in her "Afterword" is clear that she wanted readers to draw the connection between Cholly's first experiences with Darlene and his experiences with Pecola. Critic Donald Gibson feels, "It would be on the whole easier to judge Cholly if we knew less about him and if we could isolate the kitchen floor episode from the social context in which it occurs and from Cholly's past" (Gibson 170). Morrison's depiction of Cholly's past allows readers to imagine that if Cholly had grown up differently, this tragedy may never have occurred. If Cholly had not been emasculated during his first encounter with Darlene, he may not feel the need to regain his masculinity by violently dominating the females in his life.

It is evident from the text that Cholly's rape of Pecola stems from or at the very least is a result of his past experiences with racism. Gibson believes, "Morrison allows Cholly to be something other than simply evil...Morrison does not tell us what Cholly does to Pecola is all right, rather she says that what happens is very complicated, and that though Cholly is not without blame for what happens to Pecola, he is no less a victim than she" (Gibson 169). We know there is no justifiable excuse for a father having sexual intercourse with his daughter, yet Morrison is not trying to convince readers Cholly's actions are permissible; rather she is merely trying to provoke the reader into examining the reasoning behind Cholly's behavior. Through Morrison's depiction of Cholly's life, Morrison is attempting to encourage readers to look at both Cholly's actions as well as the events that led him to this point. If Morrison had not wanted readers to empathize with Cholly, she would not have bothered relating to readers the whole of Cholly's life that had led him to raping his own daughter.

Through Morrison's beautiful language and insightful delivery of her characters and their circumstances, audiences are forced into empathizing not only with the characters, but also with the

terrible aspects of society that Morrison is revealing. It would be easy to believe each character is the tragic result of his or her own unfortunate situation, but that would be a complete dismissal of the message Toni Morrison is trying to convey, which is that each character is in one way or another affected by his or her societies treatment of him or her and his or her race. The empathy Toni Morrison's characters conjure is not simply a plea for the young, black, helpless, girls in society, but rather a call for change brought about through introspection and self-transformation. By telling these characters' stories, Morrison is using them as examples of the harsh realities that exist, and is hoping to inspire readers to consider the dark aspects of Pecola's life in order to incite a moral distaste which would thereby serve as a corrective to society.

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