

## Causes of Pecola's Tragedy in *The Bluest Eye*\*

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Toni Morrison has a unique status in American literature. She is the winner of the National Book Critic Circle Award, the Pulitzer for Fiction and many other literary awards. She was granted the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, thus becoming the first African-American writer to receive this honor. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) tells the story of the bitter and tragic experience suffered by Pecola, a little black girl, and loss of black people's self-respect, confidence, value, and culture. The present paper, first of all, gives a brief introduction of the story. Then the paper explores the root causes of Pecola's tragedy from two aspects: The cause of racial oppression and self-hatred, and the cause of the loss in her independent consciousness. The paper concludes that Pecola is the victim and scapegoat of racial oppression, self-hatred and the loss of her independent consciousness existing in the black community.

*Keywords:* *The Bluest Eye*, causes, self-hatred, loss of independent consciousness

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) tells the heartbreaking story of Pecola Breedlove, a vulnerable black girl, living in Ohio, in the early 1940s. The 1993 Nobel Prize presentation speech points out, "In her depictions of the world of the black people, in life as in legend, Toni Morrison has given the Afro-American people their history back, piece by piece". Yet, at the same time her work is always symbolic of the shared human condition, transcending lines of gender, race, and class. The most enduring impression her novel leave is of "empathy, of compassion with one's fellow human beings" (YANG, 2004, p. 165).

The story centers around the tragic life of a little black girl named Pecola Breedlove. The Breedloves are the poorest family of the town, who live in a storefront of an abandoned store. Pecola, 11 years old, is black and ugly. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, is driven to alcoholism by a life of appalling racial oppression. Once he burned up his house and turned his family outdoors. Driven by her husband's rage and the unbearable misery of her life, her mother, Pauline tries to escape from life and finds peace only working as a servant in white's home. She gives more care and attention to her master's children than her own little girl. The poverty-stricken and frustrated couple is constantly quarreling and fighting. They totally ignore their daughter Pecola. At school

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other children bully and ridicule her, calling her ugly. Imprisoned by dire poverty and extreme misery, Pecola wishes for lighter skin, blond hair, and especially blue eyes like movie star Shirley Temple and other white girls, which was the mainstream white cultural values at that time. She believes that her ugliness is the source of all her misery and that having blue eyes would be the key to happiness. Finally, through madness, she thinks that her eyes have become blue. In her imagination she has been transformed into a pretty girl, as she is waiting for love and happiness to come to her. Ironically, her drunken father gets home, and gives "love" to his daughter by raping her. The little girl becomes pregnant and she gives birth to a stillborn child. She sinks deeper into despair and madness. In the end of the novel, "She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright... the damage done was total" (Morrison, 1970, p. 122). Pecola's father died in the workhouse; her mother still does housework. Pecola and her mother move to a little house on the edge of the town. The black little girl is often seen picking her way "between the tire rims and the sunflowers, among all the waste and beauty of the world-which is what she herself was" (Morrison, 1970, p. 122).

### **The Causes of Pecola's Tragedy**

#### **The Cause of Racial Oppression and Self-hatred**

*The Bluest Eye* depicts the pernicious psychological impact that the dominant white cultural values have had on black people. Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* has its setting in the black community in Lorain, Ohio, in 1941, long before the Civil Rights Movement. In those days, blackness was synonymous with ugliness. The dominant white culture exercised its hegemony and dictated standards of beauty. Many black people accepted an internalized white values and developed self-contempt and self-hatred for themselves or other black people, making some of their own people victims and scapegoats.

In *Hate Prejudice and Racism* (1993), Milton Kleg points out: "Self-hatred refers to the condition where an individual attempts to blame his or her group for those problems encountered by acts of prejudice" (as cited in YANG, 2004, p. 183). Self-hatred is a result of thorough assimilation into the dominant white culture and ideology and complete denial of one's own racial roots and cultural heritage. Self-hatred is an important theme of *The Bluest Eye*. By exploring self-hatred among the black people, *The Bluest Eye* reveals the deep psychological injury white racism has inflicted on African-Americans.

Even the mixed blood girl victimized the black people. In one of the most vivid scenes in the novel, Toni Morrison describes a particular type of blacks—brown-skinned people. These brown girls have lighter skins than other black people because their mixed blood. Many of them are descendents of former slaves who were house servants. Working in the house rather than in the fields, they were closer to their slave owners than the field Negroes. It was a common thing for a white master to have babies with black maids.

They hold themselves up high above the other blacks. These sugar-brown girls are from better-off families, "go to land-grant colleges, learn how to do the white man's work with refinement" (YANG, 2003, p. 122), marry successfully, living in their own inviolable worlds in quiet, black neighborhoods. With a certain proportion of white blood, they feel superior to other black people. Like the whites, they detest blackness, and project their hatred and contempt for it onto Negroes with darker skins. They blindly believe in the mainstream white cultural value and imitate the white middle class in every possible way. They whitened the skin, or have

surgery that makes the nose narrow and higher, or straighten their hair and may be dyed it blond. They were more alienated from their black cultural heritage.

Pecola was growing under such circumstances everyday she prays for a miracle to happen, so that she is given a pair of the bluest eyes. She is convinced that if she had blue eyes, she would become pretty and happy and that all her problems would be gone. Yet the hard reality cheated her. She not only could not get the love from her parents, but also bullied by other children. At school, Pecola kept her head down, showing she was very timid and frightened. She was very lonely, too. At recess kids played together, but nobody ever played with her. She was “ugly” because she is very black, she represented an image of extreme ugliness and dire poverty. All the kids, including Pecola herself, thought so because all of them were educated to internalize the value that dictates standards of beauty. Even the brown-skinned lady—Geraldine who even called black children “niggers”. Because of her distorted motherhood, her son—Junior also bullied Pecola.

Pecola is a victim of racial oppression and a scapegoat for the self-oppression and self-hatred existing in the black community.

### **The Cause of the Loss in Her Independent Consciousness**

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, who is described as “the popeyed, tongue-tied kid” (Baldwin, 1984, p. 14) in America with racial discrimination, could not accept her own independent subject identity and accept the image others imposed on her. Furthermore exposed to the influence of the family, community, mass media, school and others, she has lost the black aesthetic value. Her desire for the blue eyes indicates the loss of her independent consciousness.

Pecola lives in a family without love, safety, and warmth. Cholly is an irresponsible father who never shows paternal love to her and Pauline, her mother, who has self-hatred, who excludes the black culture, passes the sense of ugliness and inferiority to her, which impels Pecola to accept the white aesthetic values and concept unconsciously. The dislike and rejection of her mother to her have intensified her self-denied and her loss of the subjective consciousness, “which means that human beings as subject in a real world realizes consciously that they take the special, superior and dominate position” (Kriegel, 2009, p. 67). The subjective consciousness makes her feel fearful to the development and even fall into the crisis of the self-recognition. Lacking the parental love and guidance, Pecola has illusion of getting the blue eyes to escape from the miserable life. Morrison (1970) writes:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes”. (p. 40)

If she had the blue eyes, parents would stop fighting and her brother would not run away and her teachers and classmates would like her and would gaze at her. Having blue eyes means having everything—love, acceptance, family, and friend for. Obviously, Pecola has already accepted the white beauty norms and prays to get them everyday.

Pecola has lost her independent consciousness, so other's consciousness influences her thinking and she accepts the image that others have imposed on her. Under the impact of the white culture, the whole community is

marginalized, so the black loses their subjective consciousness, which makes them lose their own culture and aesthetic value. In that case, the blacks have unhealthy mentality and find their beauty from Pecola's ugliness. So she has experienced indifference of her family and discrimination from the others; as a little girl how could she observe the world with the correct angle?

In order to change her life, Pecola first thinks that she should change the things she has seen and she believes that changing the color of her eyes would change her fate, because from her point of view, people with blue eyes would see the beautiful world. The desire of the blue eyes indicates that she has internalized the white norm of the beauty. Therefore, she has lost the independent consciousness to think and has forgotten that she is an independent human being. In our opinion, when she faced the unfair treatment, she should have resist rather than escape and when others regarded her as ugliness, she should have reject the model of socialization they represented. The fact is, under that circumstances, that she could only accept and endure. Instead of venting her anger, she would rather live with a dream of having blue eyes. She is made by the circumstance to lose her independent consciousness and lives in the dream which makes her sink deeper and deeper into the abyss of misery. Her dream of finding shelter in her fantasy of whiteness mercilessly destroyed, the girl is thrown into madness.

### Conclusions

Pecola is a fragile and delicate child when the novel begins, but at the end of the novel, she has been almost completely destroyed by the racial oppression, self-hatred, and her loss of independent consciousness.

Pecola is a symbol of the black community's self-hatred and belief in its own ugliness. Others in the community, including her mother, father, and Geraldine, act out their own self-hatred by expressing hatred toward her. Therefore, in *The Bluest Eye*, they considered white color, blonde hair, and the bluest eye as the standard of beauty, and the black skin as the symbol of dirty and ugliness. They lost and abandoned themselves, changed the value standard and denied the fact of existence as the black, which became the source of their tragedy.

At the end of the novel, we are told that Pecola has been a scapegoat for the entire community. Her ugliness has made them feel beautiful, her suffering has made them feel comparatively lucky, and her silence has given them the opportunity for speaking. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of town haunts the community, reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. She becomes a reminder of human cruelty and an emblem of human suffering.

Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world—she simply moves to “the edge of town, where you can see her even now” (Morrison, 1970, p. 122). The paper believes that the loss of black people's independent and subjective consciousness leads to the loss of their black culture. In order to get the real independence, the blacks must recover their subjective consciousness, regain self-respect, and self-confidence, and realize that they play a crucial role in the survival of their nation.

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