

***PATTERNS OF DISMEMBERED IDENTITY IN TONI MORRISON'S THE
BLUEST EYE***

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye commandeers the merits of an ideologically intricate narrative that fosters brutally natural instincts, manifesting themselves through both internalized and externalized racism, distorted identity, absurd patterns of social hegemony that trigger and fuel a regime of explicit and absurd ideologies that seem eager to define and defile the racial dynamics of Homo Sapiens peer bonding, setting everything against a strong and truthful backdrop of trauma and intense psychological suffering. This paper aims at establishing how arbitrary misrepresentations of the concepts of beauty and identity can lead to intense spiritual misery, volatile segregation, sexual violence and confusion, and ultimately definitive madness generated by the intrinsic inability to achieve impossible standards and objectives of happiness.

Keywords: identity, beauty, conflict, confusion, imagery.

The structural balance of the novel is heavily reliant on the victimization of innocents stemming from the seemingly unstoppable and indiscriminate juggernaut of racism which not only marginalises but also tears individuals asunder. Love and affection stand as unattainable paradigms of prohibited humanity since society is not a vector of unity but a matrix of separation and humiliation. Morrison's characters are ostracised, crushed, taught to hate the very idea of their individual self, forced to function

In a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it. The destructive effect of the white society can take the form of outright physical violence, but oppression in Morrison's world is more often psychic violence. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here isles a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. (Davis, 1990: 7).

Aesthetic principles are brought into focus as Toni Morrison utilizes one of the novel's central characters, Claudia, whose narrative voice is able to beautifully but tragically capture Pecola's essence of suffering, while at the same time sounding a generalized warning that

transcends the storyline structure and flows into the epistemologies of real life, referring to the dangers of crippling and debilitating social and racial environments corroborating this ensemble of negative factors with a disconcerting lack of maternal and paternal support:

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. She spent her days, her tendril, sapgreen days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach— could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (Morrison, 186)

Given the substantial amount of abuse she suffers at the hands of her mother and above all her father, it is not very surprising to see Pecola, the female protagonist, fall prey to either the indifference or the malice of animalistic strangers. She can find no solace in her fellow human beings as her mental pathology, her biological awkwardness attracts external hostility like a magnet, eliciting hatred rather than empathy, based on the instinctual mechanism that compels all animals, including man, to force the elimination and enforce the isolation of potentially maladaptive members, thus somehow ensuring the security and integrity of the collective genome, nipping any chance of a contagion or infestation in the proverbial bud. Internal suffering and external traumatic events formulate the perfect recipe for irreparable mental and spiritual damage and applicative displacements. The grotesque physical manifestations of her mental condition bring forth nostalgia via the more than obvious associations with a fatally wounded bird that will never again kiss the sky in exuberant beauty and hope. Her fate is sealed and the mentioning of the drum beat would suggest some sort of a musicality to her mental demise, a structurally stable dirge that is now the uncompromising soundtrack to a life without hope, forever lost in the dark valleys of the defeated mind.

Submitting to the brutally relevant realities of their literary craft, as it applies to women characters in African American literature, Toni Morrison accepts that certain aesthetic ideals cannot be reached, being existentially alien to black people - for example, the ideal of blond beauty or the ideal enshrined in the cult of true womanhood. The racism inherent in both ideals destroys those who strive to achieve them, and the inner destruction expresses itself in the form of striving for the ideal. The standard of beauty that exalts the blond woman is

everywhere in American society. The black woman is thus, by definition, excluded from the beautiful. (Weever, 1991: 97)

The black women in *The Bluest Eye*, are constantly and systematically made victims to unattainable and elusive values of a collective conspiracy of rejection and humiliation. All sense of belonging is removed and the struggle for integration is reduced to nothing more than irrelevant movements among the quick sands of an unaccepting social hierarchy.

Pecola's fall into nothingness is not the direct consequence of some decisive event. Her descent is gradual and comes as the result of an accumulation of factors. Invisibility is an important contributor to her downfall, setting in motion inner feelings of worthlessness and inferiority complexes that prohibit her from detecting the value of her own humanity. Choosing to see herself through the indifferent blindness of other people is the equivalent of a negation of the self, and by accepting the imagery formulated by her malevolent peers she sets out on a journey that can only produce negative psychological consequences:

She pulls off her shoe and takes out the three pennies. The gray head of Mr. Yacobowski looms up over the counter. He urges his eyes out of his thoughts to encounter her. Blue eyes. Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks toward her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (Morrison, 2004:47)

The relational framework between Pecola and Mr. Yacobowski is heavily reliant on patterns of opposition ensuing from differentiations of race, age or gender. Even on a financial and spatial level we bear witness to a clash between pseudo-poverty and established financial stability taking place inside a spatial matrix controlled by the small business owner. This strategic advantage and the arbitrary vectors of differentiation mentioned earlier make the shopkeeper gain an aura of insipid superiority manifested through selective blindness, a status quo uncontested by the little girl who is in the desperate pursuit of visibility, blaming and tormenting herself for the narrow-minded views of someone who in all honesty should display maturity and wisdom rather than mindless and purposelessness discrimination.

Yacobowski sees Pecola as the lesser being when in fact he lacks the necessary moral prerequisites attributed to advanced versions of enlightened humanity. He is passively aggressive towards the little girl because of gregarious manifestations of instinct but also because he himself feels insecure and seeks cultural reassurance by undermining the vulnerable

yet honest openness of a pure young girl who just wants to connect on a fundamentally human level and forge some semblance of a meaningful human bond, ever so eager to share a smile or a gentle look. The world however is not built in this fashion and all that is defenseless and pure must be dragged into the vile pit of social perdition, erasing from our eyes, our minds and our so-called souls the few individuals who can actually make the world move towards a brighter, more innocent tomorrow.

Racism in the novel is not only inter-racial but also intra-racial as it is clearly evident from the treatment poor Pecola suffers at the hands of the ignorant black children who torment our defenseless protagonist:

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. 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. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit. (Morrison, 61)

The reasons for which they engage in pathetic expressions of insult are nothing more than frail excuses, immature pretexts that actually hide a deeper, more substantial motivation that actually has nothing to do with Pecola. They pick on the girl because they need an outlet, a release from the hatred they foster against themselves, their blackness. The boys are ashamed of being who they are so they find somebody weak, a defenseless young girl who can give them some sense of empowerment, allowing them to shift some of the focus and shame in an almost ritualistic artistic expression of early human degradation. The boys' "macabre ballet" is similar to the attack protocols of hyenas in the wild, circling the wounded prey, creating a space of constricting oppression, using numerical advantage and unrelenting persistence in order to make their target tired and disoriented. Associating animalism with the behavior habits of young children signals Morrison's deep distrust in the human condition, expanding certain mental analytical protocols so as to encompass a fully functional, global human dynamic of hatred, self-hatred and exploitation.

An aesthetic rehabilitation of the myriad of subjective factors which influence and ultimately determine the perception and understanding of beauty brings into focus the conundrum that is Maureen Peal. The girl is a virtually identical replica of Pecola, with the exception that she has a lighter skin tone. This minor differentiation in melanin levels should theoretically go unnoticed, offer nothing to the general portrait of pertinent aesthetic protocols, yet it appears to make all the difference in the world:

If she was cute—and if anything could be believed, she was—then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us. (Morrison, 70)

The fact that Maureen's vaguely different coloration of the epidermis makes her special is based on the reductive, false assumption shared by blacks and whites alike throughout the novel that whiteness can be equated to perfection and the whiter you are the better off you are. Morrison tries to subtly mock this mental *modus operandi*, placing the proverbial blame on chronotopic contextualization, but at the same time she has to acknowledge the concrete seriousness of the situation. If whites are directly interested to promote this false ideal of beauty, the author is baffled as to why black people would be so eager to embrace a doctrine that promotes and rationalizes their own inferiority. This absurd undertaking does ultimately find justification in a deep seeded inferiority complex, aggressively implemented through centuries of continuous and malignant oppression. Maureen is by no means superior to Pecola, nor is any white girl for that matter, the instrumentality of the situation is strictly related to both exterior and interior observations of beauty which originate from arbitrary social norms that have nothing to do with genetics or spiritual evolution.

Pecola's existence is dominated by angst, generated by strangers, white and black alike and exacerbated by her immediate family, by her mother and father, who instead of being her protectors become her tormentors, venting personal frustrations on what is supposed to be the fruit of their undying love for one another, generating constant pockets of spatial suffering.

Returning to social hostility we bear witness to the emergence of a mild case of agoraphobia affecting our protagonist, perhaps a simple defense mechanism designed to help avoid social entanglements by trying to steer clear of social interactions altogether, though Pecola will conclude such a course of action would be unfeasible, and meeting factors of hostility on a daily basis is sadly enough a necessary evil:

Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn't change, and outdoors is here to stay. (Morrison, 19)

Linking spatial vectors of relevance to an individual's internal metaphysical condition is a blatant testimony of Morrison's belief that the localization of matter is inextricably attached to the energy impulses, the unseen forces that govern both destiny and free will. As individuals we do indeed possess free will, though that transcendent strictly human attribute is often restricted or even cancelled out by an even more powerful force: luck. To some the term may appear abstract, seen as lacking any real substance, but to the author luck is destiny, simply put it is all about being born at the right time in the right place, within the proper family environment. Any abdication from this path automatically entails a corrupted, limited existence, outside our parameters of control, forcing us to be unwilling spectators within an oppressive chronotopic regime that obligates us to accept the burden(s) of our hereditary allocations.

The novel's protagonist, Pecola is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one side a healthy organism is designed to avoid or solve any potential dangers, and seeing how every square meter of her outside world is occupied by some generator of aggression, an agoraphobic pathology may appear as a reasonable solution. If she avoids those spaces of angst then she cannot be harmed or made to suffer in any way. Sadly enough, however, no human being is an island unto himself/herself and our genetic pre-programming does not allow us to avoid social interaction indefinitely. One instinct will override the other and our protagonist will have to re-enter the chronotopic setting designed especially for her breakdown, in perfect

tune with the astute sense of awareness which stipulates the fact that we are unable to run or hide from destiny forever seeing how life has a fairly unique way of catching up to us.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* clearly expands a narrative weaving which justifies the formation of identity via differential spatial and temporal delimitations. The novel however is not solely committed to this analytical direction and also explores the possibility of how a distinct individual could in fact make a strong impact on his or her milieu. This hypothesis may appear encouraging, however the author opts to focus on negative impact and consequently grants voice to Junior's mother Geraldine on this particular issue, permitting a vicious and malevolent portrayal of Pecola based on moronic personal observations and unjust generalizations:

They were everywhere. They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy and-potato-chip dream. In the long, hot days, they idled away, picking plaster from the walls and digging into the earth with sticks. They sat in little rows on street curbs, crowded into pews at church, taking space from the nice, neat, colored children; they clowned on the playgrounds, broke things in dime stores, ran in front of you on the street, made ice slides on the sloped sidewalks in winter. The girls grew up knowing nothing of girdles, and the boys announced their manhood by turning the bills of their caps backward. Grass wouldn't grow where they lived. Flowers died. Shades fell down. Tin cans and tires blossomed where they lived. They lived on cold black-eyed peas and orange pop. Like flies they hovered; like flies they settled. And this one had settled in her house. (Morrison, 86)

The imagery Geraldine generates with respect to Pecola and others like her is that of a swarm of locusts invading a beautiful and fertile land only to infest it with their purulent nature. The little girl's sleep arrangements and the subsequent generalized profiling which ensues would indicate a subhuman dimension to the lives of the defenseless and destitute, revealing hatred and resentment in the mind of the observer who performs the so-called descriptive diagnosis. The girl's version of a potential imaginative space of beauty is met with arrogance and distaste, deemed trifle and relevant only to her inferior condition. Geraldine views the Pecolas of the world as destroyers of houses, people who poison and defile the very ground they inhabit and in her opinion nature itself feels an aversion towards them, refusing to sprout new life in the areas they inhabit. Though believing herself to be a righteous Christian, Geraldine takes it upon herself to deny an innocent child access into the house of God, believing our protagonist would only be "taking space" from proper children who are far more deserving

than her. The fact that shades fall down when one such child passes by a civilized household would also denote a paranoid fear of somehow being infected by the ineffable disease of the soul carried by these defeated innocents.

The pattern of affiliation is expanded in order to incorporate associations with flies, indicating a close proximity to pestilence, death and perhaps even the lord of the flies himself. Morrison allows the manifestation of such a grotesquely distorted perceptions of reality not because she agrees with the demented woman's analytical prowess, she does it out of the creative and moral imperative compelling her to expose the darkness in people's hearts, in the hope of ending the tyranny of preconceptions through catharsis and a balanced approach to life she is more than willing to share with her readership.

Pecola's path to trauma is most certainly fueled by the intrepid members of her community, but it is her mother and father who utterly crush and destroy her. Her family should provide a protective spatial district of love and hope, a buffer zone between their little girl and the harsh realities of the world, but instead they shroud her in poisonous and toxic behavior by sexually molesting her (the father), and refusing to love and support her (the mother). The father's ultimate manifestation of hatred and parental evil is closely linked to contextual spatial proximity and certain safe areas where he can reveal his monstrosity. They say a man's house is his castle, and Cholly Breedlove takes the concept of *prima noctis* to sickening heights by raping his daughter inside a spatial perimeter he feels he is lord of. The man is nothing more than a despicable coward who vents up decades of frustration and hatred on an innocent girl he was supposed to protect, and for some reason Morrison wants us to be aware of the time and place that made a helpless man into a faceless beast:

Afraid of running into Darlene, he would not go far from the house, but neither could he endure the atmosphere of his dead Aunt's house. The picking through her things, the comments on the "condition" of her goods. Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men—but not now. Not in impotence but later, when the hatred could find sweet expression. (Morrison, 137)

The author's decision to show how a simple young man can be turned into a fiend as a result of trauma, offers us much needed psychological insight into the birth of mental monstrosity. Breedlove may very well be an abomination, but Morrison shows us that we are not born evil, it is our surrounding environment that makes us who we are. Cholly's sexual grotesquery directed at his daughter stems from his first sexual experience decades earlier, when he had been forced to have sexual relations with a woman under the supervision of two deranged white men. Feeling utterly disempowered and emasculated, he appears to find refuge in the restorative space of his aunt's home, afraid to confront his male aggressors. His weakness drives him to allocate some blame unto Darlene, who is as much a victim as he is, and perhaps even more so, considering it was his duty to protect her. The misguided hatred he feels towards her is not successfully materialized because of the honest sense of shame he experiences every time he lays eyes upon her, however all of the filth inside him would be allowed to fester for a later time and space, rearing its ugly, deformed head through the incest which would find Pecola as a more than acceptable victim, inside what should have been a protective and nurturing chronotope.

Pauline Breedlove's utter lack of love, empathy, sympathy or support for her daughter is the consequence of her desire to swap on space for another, to be a part of the white world even if only as a meager servant. She views Pecola as an anchor around her neck, binding her to the realm of the unwanted blackness she is so eager leave behind. The incident with the pan at the white man's house where Pauline works, and the double standard of procedural interaction applied to the white girl and her own daughter is highly indicative of her dedicated allegiance to a certain pattern of spatial causality and all the subsequent existential modifiers that might ensue relevant to her respective option:

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola's fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola's legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger. (Morrison, 99)

The trigger of the unfortunate accident that lets Pauline show her true colors is not "nervousness" nor is "awkwardness", it is Pecola's profound sense of defeated awareness that

she is not wanted by her mother who views her like a burden rather than a little bundle of joy. The accident is nothing more than the subconscious expression of a need for closure, a genuine desire to get powerful emotions out in the open and overtly learn the truth however painful it may prove to be. The verdict as to the true nature of Polly's maternal instincts is most definitely delivered, considering the fact that the woman is more concerned with the stains on the white girl's dress than she is with the burns that are ripping through the flesh of her daughter. There is no room for maternal sentimentality in the dare I say undead, cold and selfish heart of Pauline. The woman is nothing more than a mindless drone who would gladly see her child, her own flesh and blood torn apart by the ravages of fate if that meant an illusory better life for herself in a white world she devoutly reveres as idyllic.

The combination between external aggression at the hands of malicious strangers and the crippling impact both her parents have on her, set against the backdrop of omnipresent spatial areas of perpetual aggression provide the framework for an existential perfect storm that annihilates Pecola's frail psychological construct, thrusting her towards a maladaptive delusional architecture. She no longer possesses any meaningful roots, losing trust in the merits of human togetherness, forever alone forever, forever what Homi Bhabha called "unhomed":

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in the familiar division of social life into the private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow... The recesses of the domestic space become sites for most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused: and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (Bhabha, 1994:9)

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