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LEGACY OF SHAME: A PSYCHOANALYTIC HISTORY OF
TRAUMA IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Clifford David Hayes, Jr. and my children for their continued patience with me as I struggled through this process.

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LEGACY OF SHAME: A PSYCHOANALYTIC HISTORY OF
SHAME, TRAUMA AND INCEST IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

MARTINA L.HAYES

ABSTRACT

The Bluest Eye is Toni Morrison's troubling short novel which focuses on the lives of a traumatized, and disempowered African-American family and the community in which they live. The book openly discusses a variety of social taboos carried out by various members of a Black community in Lorain, Ohio. The most disturbing being the rape of a young Black girl, resulting in pregnancy by her father. Through the omniscient narration of a teenage girl, readers are thrown into the lives and thoughts of the adults and children within this community as they attempt to deal with these extraordinary situations as they occur. The goal of this thesis is to show through a primarily psychoanalytical lens, how living in communities rife with racism and prejudices helped to mold the dynamics of the Breedlove's lives.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that is was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow.”

Begun in the mid 1960’s and considered by some critics and writers such as Christopher Bollen, to be her bravest work, Toni Morrison’s first novel *The Bluest Eye* deals with many sensitive issues, though its main focus is on the rape of Pecola Breedlove by her father Cholly. Morrison is quoted as saying that in writing the book “one of the problems confronted was “language” (Clark 230), this is possibly due to the sensitive subject matter that is presented throughout the book. Morrison’s novel consists of sexual intercourse, menstruation, pedophilia, racism, prejudices, rape and incest, with incest being the primary focus of the writing. Incest became the main focus, because the intent was to

disclose secrets, and demonstrate most importantly how “inevitably” destructive incest is to the child.

While *The Bluest Eye* has been studied by feminist, psychoanalyst, and ethnic studies practitioners in an attempt to understand the incestuous rape, shame and trauma motifs that exist throughout the book, the greater part of the criticisms written about *The Bluest Eye* are first and foremost psychoanalytic in content, due to the fact that many critics examine the mental state of the characters before and after the rape. Morrison says that she wanted the reader to feel as though they were “co-conspirators” with the rapist. To do this Morrison took pains to ensure that she never portrayed the actions of the characters as wrong in order to show how everyone has their own problems. Morrison even goes so far as to use words such as “friendly,” “innocent,” and “tender,” to soften the damages while the rape is in progress” (Jones 3).

Of all the social wrongs committed in the book, Morrison makes incest the focal point because it is a societal anomaly that is forbidden and taboo in almost every society in the civilized world. Prior to this novel, although followed by a steady stream of others later, there was “no major treatment of incest in literature before 1975” (Barnes, 3). The mere mention of incest in literary texts until the twentieth century has been the cause of controversy, which has often led to the banning of books that discuss the topic in universities and public schools throughout the country.

This according to author Karen McLennon, was a way for those in power to exclude literary history of the past which “left out women’s incest literature by suppressing the works, misrepresenting their meaning, ostracizing the authors, or banning the subject” (McKinney, 3).

Morrison was undoubtedly aware of how critics and perhaps publicist would receive incest based literature. So why would she foreground incest as the emblematic problem for the Breedloves, when there are numerous appalling socially prohibited acts taking place within the novel? It is because Morrison is the first author to introduce readers to a progression of each characters lives and mental states prior to their misdeeds, most notably the rape of Pecola. By allowing her audience a glimpse into the psyche of Pecola and her parents traumatic and shameful upbringings, Morrison attempts to show how society and community are as much at fault if not more for the events that led up to Pecola’s rape as her parents were. This thesis will strive to show how Morrison brought forth awareness to a well-known secret, that has claimed thousands of victims, and showcase how society’s disempowerment of a people whether real or imagined is also at the root of continuous traumatic events occurring within certain familial structures, often lasting for generations, and how incest is the most destructive of all taboos to a family unit above all else.

Published in 1970, *The Bluest Eye* was written during a time of political awareness and an increase in Black power/Black pride movements. Morrison's controversial novel came during a time when Black writers were focusing on Black Beauty when she introduced her "uniquely ugly family." Morrison has said that the "publication (as opposed to the writing), involved the exposure; the writing was the disclosure of secrets, secrets "we" shared and those withheld from us by ourselves and by the world outside the community (212). Unfortunately, many scholars within the African American community criticized the novel as being problematic and mired in the pathology of the Afro-American experiences that "displaces social pathology and failed values into the Black community" (Dittmar 138). The relationship between the characters of Cholly, and Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* have been used as a blueprints of sorts by feminist during the late 1970's up until now to gain valuable insight into the reasons and effects of father/daughter incestuous relationships in modern literature. Father daughter incest coincidentally, has the most reported cases in court records, as well as clinically and in psychology offices since 1981.

The focus of this discussion will be lead using a host of secondary sources by critics such as Joseph Adamson, Hilary Clark, Elizabeth Breau, Dorothy Willner and several others whose studies in the field of psychology and taboo literature where essential in the continuation of this argument relating to incest, and trauma within family structures. The

criticisms and literature chosen to shape this argument where needed to gain a more general understanding and for personal satisfaction as to the possible causes and influences that lead to hundreds of women and children succumbing to the effects of incestuous rapes. Literature that sought to understand and not so much blame the perpetrators of this debilitating crime were researched in order to find closure and peace for events that have personally taken place.

By gaining a small understanding of long-term psychological issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder, and the continuation of damages caused by untreated traumas that often result in shame, this thesis will examine the effects of generational trauma, and the dysfunctional household of the Breedlove's, by exploring the many complicated conflicts in their lives. It is hoped that this discussion will be a springboard of sorts regarding the prevalence of incest in African-American communities and the suppression of the topic.

The Bluest Eye presents a disturbing account of Cholly's rape of his daughter, and then partially denies what it has described by insisting that Cholly loved Pecola even though his "touch was fatal," for the "love of a free man is never safe" (206). In order to understand what it means for Cholly Breedlove to be free, one must learn how he attained this freedom. Cholly's story begins with abandonment; at four days old his mother wraps him in blankets and leaves him to die by railroad tracks,

then his aunt who found him and raises him dies, when his ill-fated quest to find the man he believes to be his father results in the knowledge that this man doesn't want him, Cholly then becomes what Morrison calls a "free man"-not one who feels autonomous or self-authorized, but one who is unmoored, free to veer this way or that with nothing more to lose," this type of freedom is what allowed him to turn to his daughter out of a confused longing for what is missing in his life, and what he believes to be missing in hers (534). Cholly's becoming free is also an example of Michael Ryan's post structuralism views in that:

Values, ideas and norms of Western philosophy and western social life-from truth conceived as a free agent who determines his or her own destiny-deny the materiality and contingency of existence, which is characterized by movement, change and multiplicity, rather than logic, regularity and identity (67).

From the moment that Cholly lost control of his bowels, he became free to do as he pleased to those whom he was closest to. However, he never took his frustrations out on the White people who ridiculed him or prevented him from advancing in society as he thought he should. He had no responsibilities, and he took no responsibility for any of his actions. His freedom deemed him uncontrollable, enabling him to commit unspeakable acts with little or no remorse. This is partially due to the fact

that Cholly had no positive parental role models to learn from. His poor upbringing is why fatherhood rendered him totally dysfunctional.

Having never experienced the bond and normal healthy love that a child receives from a parent, Cholly doesn't know how to love his family. He hasn't learned how to respond or care for them in their time of need. Dorothy Willner's essay "Incest and Incest taboos" published in 1983, is possibly one of the first criticisms focusing on the incestuous/rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*. By applying the psychoanalytically informed case studies of Sigmund Freud and Levi Strauss, Willner proposes that incest is prohibited to reduce the trauma and psychic disruption that sexual activity can inflict on children when it is imposed by a more adult transgressor.

She also suggests that "fathers dominate their daughters by virtue of male dominance over females and by virtue of household authority" (Willner, 139). In a drunken stupor Cholly arrives home and notices his daughter, who appears to be sad. He does express empathy or concern for her at that moment. By using the stream of conscious thought that Cholly has while looking at Pecola as she is cleaning dishes, Willner suggests that "the meaning of their incest to incestuous fathers involves more than stigma. Even while enjoining secrecy on their daughters they prefer not to see themselves as abusers. They commonly represent themselves as contributing to their daughters' education as when Cholly thinks:

Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened-why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could he do for her ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year old daughter?...How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all (Morrison 161)?

This passage presents to readers a "whipped" and "burdened man" who though usually unconcerned and unbothered by the poverty, and other dire circumstances in which his family exists, at this moment he feels for his daughter. He wants to love her, yet he doesn't know how, he wants to console her, to touch her lovingly, yet, he doesn't know how. He is powerless. Powerless because he has allowed his upbringing to control his life. He is powerless because society has led him to believe that he cannot control his or his family's circumstances. So in this moment, this man who usually has no control over many of the events that have taken place in his life up until this moment, believes that he can comfort his daughter, in this he has control.

He can love her, he has the power to make her happy. He would be incapable at this moment as seeing his actions as rape. Shelly Wong contends that society's disempowerment of Cholly and his past

experiences are to blame for the rape of Pecola. Her article “Transgression as Poesis in *The Bluest Eye*,” written in 1990 acknowledges Cholly’s inability to “ground himself in new measures” results in despair. And that, initially unfitted, by way of race and class, for the dominant culture’s patterning of experience, and then fitted too tightly into the “constantness, varietylessness, and sheer weight of the sameness of his marriage” resorts to sex with his daughter (466).

Furthermore, Wong suggests that the rape of Pecola is an arrested history from Cholly’s abandonment by his parents, the intrusions of White men during his first sexual encounter and the slave trades “disruptive generative” ever proliferating body to the status of exchangeable homogeneous units Wong asserts that:

As Cholly moves to rape her, Pecola’s “shocked body” startles Cholly out of a miasma of routinized desire that was his marriage, setting in a motion of “confused mixture”...Pecola’s shocked body excites him, perhaps because it recalls for him a time before the freezing of his bodily imagination. Thus while trying to break out of the stultifying confines of his quotidian existence by doing a wild and forbidden thing. Cholly succeeds in copying the two earlier moments. In turning back the process through raping his own daughter, Cholly breaks with and thwarts genealogical time (Wong 477).

This thwarting of time is important in *The Bluest eye* due to the role of Cholly's first sexual encounter being disrupted and unfulfilled. It also coincides with theorist Gaston Bachelard's theory of felicitous space, which asserts that we do not know ourselves in time but rather in space and that "Houses contain memories of ourselves at certain times, but these memories are quickened by material images of familiar spaces that return us to ourselves again and again. The house he says, constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs of illusions of stability" (Gwin 316). Gwin proposes that Cholly Breedlove's rape of his daughter in the kitchen of their home is "enacted against the backdrop of what in another house might have been a nurturing domestic space for eating and talking" is lost on Cholly, because he never experienced these things, so he is unable to provide even this small act of normalcy having never been exposed to it himself in a family setting or socially.

In essence, Cholly Breedlove is a man who was not only abandoned by his parents, but society had also turned its back on him as well. The only women in his life were his wife and daughter. This also aligns with the more general progression of essays and articles associated with *The Bluest Eye* which deal with the disempowerment of African Americans and misplaced ideas of beauty within the African American community. Having nowhere or no other persons to turn to for comfort or communication, Cholly's only recourse upon seeing the dejected posturing of his daughter was to show love through sex. As horrible as this may

seem, there is a substantial amount of research that rationalizes Cholly's actions. Although Morrison has often been accused of taking the blame away from Cholly, she is merely providing insight into the events of his life that contributed to his actions.

Adamson and Clark have also noted that "while some critics/readers of *The Bluest Eye* have remarked on the "raw horror" of the rape scene or have described the rape as a "tremendous and overwhelming act of paternal violence" or have insisted that Cholly's act is "diabolical," others have followed the texts directives by partially denying what Cholly has done or by attempting to exonerate him (226). This marks a noticeable difference between the views and ideas of feminist opposed to those of psychoanalyst's over the past thirty years. For instance, if one were to relate Cholly's actions, feelings, or even his momentary fit of passion for Pecola to Freud's theory of the "unconscious" which he termed as a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives associated with sexuality and violence (391). Then it is almost understandable that because Cholly never had a proper family life as a child, and because he lived outside of normal society for most of his formative years, he never learned how to control the kind of desires that would ordinarily be repressed if stirred up between an adult man and a young girl.

Once again, Cholly's belief that he was a truly free man, is what allowed him to have sex with his daughter. He was never to truly have control over any his actions from the moments he lost control of his bowels after being shunned by his father. Madelon Sprengnether suggests that because of Cholly's prior life experiences the rape was not "primarily sexual, but something deeper, something that if not actually childlike then reminiscent of childhood in all its seeming innocence and vulnerability. Pecola reminds him perhaps of a lost buried self." To support this argument she employ's Morrison's words to describe what many feel was an attempt to regain something he had lost with his wife:

The tenderness welled up within him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter. Crawling on all fours toward her, he raised his hand and he caught the foot in an upward stroke. Pecola lost her balance and was about to careen to the floor. Cholly raised his other hand to her hips to save her from falling, He put his head down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the firm sweetness of her flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist (Morrison 162).

Gaston Bachelard's theory of "felicitous space," is based on houses containing memories of ourselves at certain times, but that the memories are quickened by material images of familiar spaces that return us to

ourselves again and again (Barnes 316). This theory asserts that the house gives a sense of security and belonging, something the Breedloves had been unable to attain in their lives together or from their community. As a result, Cholly associates this scene of Pecola standing by the sink to that of his first encounter with Pauline standing by the fence, and the other remembrance of being unable to protect Darlene from the degradation that they both suffered. The resurfacing of these past memories coupled with Pecola's look of sadness appears to thrust Cholly over the edge as he wonders at the plight of his daughter. There is nothing in Cholly Breedlove's life that suggests he had any parenting skills that would enable him to cope with any of the emotional issues that his daughter was experiencing.

As a result, a man with no religion, friends, or any place in society would be incapable of understanding how this sexual act with his daughter would be considered taboo or forbidden. Who would hold him accountable? Because he never truly understood or felt love, he quit possibly believed that he was showing his daughter love and kindness. That is why he wanted to "fuck her tenderly but the tenderness would not hold." This is due to all the untreated traumas inflicted upon him. Cholly Breedlove had been abandoned, ridiculed, emasculated, unloved and un-nurtured most of his life without ever having any type of therapy, as a result, he achieved a negative form of freedom which is best explained by the passage in *The Bluest Eye* which state:

The pieces of Cholly's life could only become coherent in the head of a musician. Only a musician would sense, know, without even knowing what he knew, that 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. Free to sleep in a doorway or between the sheets if a singing woman. Free to take a job, free to leave it. Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him (Morrison 159-160).

This informs readers that Cholly is a man capable of many things, and yet, he is unfree to love and be loved or to possess self-respect, but he is unrestricted from having sex, hating, and fighting and even to kill; he is free to be unresponsive to death and free to prefer the devil to God. It is these unresolved issues that also permit him pass on to his daughter a legacy of hurt, shame and trauma. Therefore, the idea that "because Cholly has been socially conditioned to view himself as an "object of disgust," he "can do nothing other than objectify Pecola," and hence he exploits his daughter "because his own exploitation makes it impossible to do otherwise" and at least...he wanted to touch his daughter" (226) is almost understandable, when one learns of his disassociation from society.

CHAPTER II

“A MOTHER’S NEGLIGENCE”

In her 1993 essay “Phallusies of Interpretation” feminist Ann duCille criticizes those who have viewed writers of novels such as *The Bluest Eye* as “a new literature based on the premise that black America is a vast emotionless wasteland of hustlin’ men and maimed women.” She seeks to defend Black women writers who have been charged not only with “historical inaccuracy but with racial infidelity as well-“with in effect putting gender before their race, their (White) feminism before their Black family and inventing historical fictions that serve a feminist rather than a Black nationalist agenda” (duCille 559). Furthermore, she argues against those who believe that Black feminist have drawn a simplistic sex line in society that has put them on the wrong side of some fundamental questions that indeed:

For Black women, membership (real or assumed) in the sisterhood of feminists is in some circles an unpardonable sin punishable by excommunication, if not from the race, certainly from the ranks of those who have authored the sacred texts of the race's canon (duCille 559).

DuCille advocates that novels such as *The Bluest Eye* are important and that they (1) are essential to the Black experience; (2) that there is an absolute historical truth; (3) that art absolutely must tell the truth; (4) that Black men and women are "okay" in their erotic relations with one another and that women writer's being able to tell the whole story regardless of the horror that topics such as incest invoke.

In the writing of *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison is honest in the telling of each character's flaws, but the most troubling is that of Pauline Breedlove, a woman who forsakes her family in search of her own desires. One of the earliest glimpses readers are given of Morrison's character Pauline Breedlove's (Pecola's mother), formative years, are those of a young girl isolated from her immediate family. So traumatized by the disfigurement of her foot when she was two years old, Pauline imposed a self-inflicted isolation and self-hatred that would set her apart from others most of her life. She blamed her foot for no one in the family fondly giving her a nickname or caring or catering to her likes and dislikes, affections that were bestowed on all of the other children. Sadly, there is never any mention of her having at least one sibling that she was close to, or of her having developed any friendships. After leaving school she began doing the only thing that she felt she was good at, and that was housekeeping. It was a solitary job that she enjoyed from a very young age. Always prone to fantasizing, Pauline in her loneliness began to envision the man that would come and take her away

from her lonely existence. When Cholly Breedlove entered her life, ignoring her foot and kissing her legs, showing her the much needed attention that she so desperately craved, he did rescue her from that life of isolation, temporarily.

Me and Cholly was getting along good then. We come up north; supposed to be more jobs and all. We moved into two rooms up over a furniture store, and I set about housekeeping. Cholly was working at the steel plant, and everything was looking good. I don't know what all happened. Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here...I 'member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home (Morrison, 117).

As a woman who “never felt at home anywhere, or that she belonged anyplace (111),” one would think that in the early years of their marriage they would have cultivated a semblance of love and the potential to build a foundation upon which they could have thrived, and risen above the cycle of isolation and abandonment dictated by both their childhoods.

Nonetheless, the history of negligence and isolation of which both Cholly and Pauline were accustomed rendered them incapable of depending on each other positively, or of being dependable to their children later. The positive versus the negative aspects of the dependability, or lack thereof in their relationship with each other will be discussed later.

Since Pauline like Cholly came from a family structure in which she was never truly made to feel any genuine connection, she never

developed the social skills needed to build and maintain relationships with others. Primarily, because she had believed herself to be ugly and was aware in the knowledge that others perceived her to be unattractive as well. However, unlike Cholly, Pauline had initially sought to assimilate herself within the community. Yet, feeling as though it were difficult to associate with women in the north, Pauline once again resorted to fantasizing, only this time it was about living the life of White woman. Consequently, Pauline began imitating the styles and appearances of White actresses in a vain attempt to accomplish this.

Yet, just as Cholly began losing control of his actions the moment he lost control of his bowels, Pauline lost control over her fragile family structure, sense of beauty and her ability to totally fit into the Black community once she began to lose her teeth. Once Pauline's ideals of beauty were shattered and her teeth began to fall out more regularly, she no longer cared to acquire the physical beauty for herself or her family which she had once tried to capture from the movies. Instead she attempted to claim the material items and image of the Fishers as her own and she found solace in her perceived ugliness "There I was, five months pregnant trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to being ugly" (123). This decision would ultimately lead to her further distancing herself from

members of her family and community due to her becoming available, and accountable solely to the White family that employed her.

Pauline's inability to fully embrace and accept her Blackness forced her to create an imaginary existence that she cultivated from years of movie going. However, once she found that she was incapable of mimicking the looks and lives of White women, Pauline began finding her much needed acceptance in the home of her White employers. This eventually enabled Pauline to disconnect totally from her husband and children, by pretending or acting as though the Fishers home, power, money and even their family were hers as seen when she states that:

“Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise...The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her...power, praise and luxury were hers in this household. Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children (128).

Pauline's complete devotion to her imaginary life put her in a situation in which she once again became inaccessible to her immediate family. Although historically, the household was often the only place where women Black or White could exert some form of control and power, it would become for white women a place of honor in the belief that “the domestic pedestal was supposed to offer the highest possible achievement

and satisfaction, preferable certainly to jobs, votes, and other alternatives championed by the woman's rights movement (Palmer, 8). Running the house and playing the role of the perfect hostess, and the ability to manage maids, cooks and nanny's defined the social status of wealthy Whites.

For Black woman, a position as a cook, maid or nanny/mammy was the only employment that most could get after slavery and for many years to come. In fact, my great-grandmother held a bachelor's degree in housekeeping from the University of Tennessee in 1940's. The hours required for a Black woman to work in the home of a White employer made it virtually impossible for a woman to give her family the care and attention that it needed. It was often expected or preferred that the Black maid have no family of her own, because she was needed as many as twelve through sixteen hours a day, not including the time required to travel to and from the home of her White employers.

Further research also suggests that "Black women, whose work for White families in White neighborhoods meant isolation in a period of rigid segregation of social activities (DW 68). This also would imply that Pauline knowingly placed herself in a position to neglect her children. Coincidentally, to justify this separateness Pauline also decided that if she were to be ugly, she would at least possess a higher standard of morals than anyone she would come into contact with. This new found morality and sense of self in the mother is an instance of Freud's theory of the

unconscious which he coined as “a repository of repressed desires, feelings, memories, and instinctual drives, many of which according to Freud, have to do with sexuality and violence (Rivken, and Ryan 389). Unable to repress her feelings of being an inadequate Black woman, Pauline is also unable to get over her past hopes of beauty and the love making that she once shared with Cholly. Therefore, although she often reflects on the beautiful, colorful sexual experiences they once shared, she keeps those feelings to herself repressed, and only nurtures the violent encounters that she now has with her husband.

Pauline’s unresolved issues with her foot, her failed marriage and sex life, along with the trauma of losing her teeth were additional catalysts that led to Pecola’s rape, and the total breakdown of this already fractured family structure. In the absence of a visible mother figure the Breedlove children were completely vulnerable to societal abuses and those taking place within the home. Pauline’s newfound sense of morality manifested itself in many negative ways, most notably in her need to feed Cholly’s sins. Pauline admitted that she “avenged herself on Cholly by forcing him to indulge in all the weaknesses she despised (126). She needed Cholly’s depravities to uphold her position in the church she attended and as an excuse for her negligence in the care of their children and her household. Likewise, Pauline also came to believe that “If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would have never forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly’s sins

desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became. In the name of Jesus” (42).

Pauline’s sole purpose became building a loving, respectable reputation with her employers while she established a culture of fear and distance in her family. Pauline’s complacency with Cholly’s transgressions made her complicit in the rape of Pecola. Although both parents had experienced traumatic occurrences throughout their lives. Cholly was not as conscious of his acts of terror against his family. Whereas Pauline was not only aware of the problems, she fed and bred them. Pauline’s trauma resulted in her developing a selfish vanity that she used to help her achieve her idea of happiness at the expense of her children. Knowing that her husband was an abusive alcoholic, capable of terrible cruelties, Pauline never appears to have had a concern as to the safety of her children, during Cholly’s tirades. Additionally, Pauline’s was aware of her own growing meanness in her interactions with her children, and she admits that “they worried the life out of me. Sometimes I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, but I couldn’t seem to stop” (Morrison 124).

Just as Cholly took his frustrations out on her, she took hers out on the children. Pauline selfishness in obtaining her needs made her indifferent to the needs of her children, most notably Pecola’s needs. Pauline’s lack of concern for the wellbeing of her daughter is also

witnessed when Pecola burnt herself after dropping a pie in the home of the Fishers. Pauline responded by inflicting more pain, she slapped Pecola several times, made her leave, then ran to the aid of the Fishers daughter who was crying because the pie had fallen. She used whatever maternal instincts she possessed only for her charge. Pauline's gratification from the services she provided for everyone outside of her family is a model of Dorothy Willner's examination of feminist and psychoanalytic literature in which she contends that the "role of the negligent mother in instances where incest and rape transpired "are commonly presented as defective in their family roles: physically absent, often because of illness: sexually unavailable or unfulfilling, seeking nurture in the reversal of roles; collusive in the incest (Willner, 139).

Pauline who is capable of nurturing, as seen in her care of the Fisher child, is grossly negligent to the needs of her offspring. And because of this she too is "collusive" in the rape of Cholly. Although Cholly has committed many crimes against his family, Pauline has forgiven him for them all, except the rape of their daughter Pecola. Yet, this too she may have forgiven the rape if the resulting pregnancy could have been hidden away from those without question in the community. This is believable because she thrived on his sins. However, unable to hide this shameful act from the community, this becomes the final and most devastating act of violence inflicted upon this family, and it is what finally drove them completely apart. After Pecola's pregnancy, Pauline

adds to her daughter's trauma by beating her, completely ignoring her and never speaking to her again.

CHAPTER III

A DAUGHTER'S INHERITANCE

“Throughout history, some people have adapted to terrible life events with flexibility and creativity, while others have become fixated on the trauma and gone on to lead traumatized and traumatizing existences” (Clark 207).

“Traumatized and traumatizing existences” were the only legacies that parents such as Pauline and Cholly could leave their children. The isolation and trauma that life had imposed upon Cholly and Pauline affected their entire family and were contributing factors in the plight of Pecola. J. Brooks Bouson describes *The Bluest Eye* as a “complicated shame drama and trauma narrative, in which Pecola is the victim of inter- and intraracial shaming, who is traumatized by both physically and sexually abusive parents” (Clark 207). In presenting the lives of the Breedlove’s, *The Bluest Eye* dramatizes: shame-vulnerability”-that is, “a sensitivity to and readiness for shame”-and “shame anxiety,” which is “evoked by an imminent danger of unexpected exposure, humiliation, and rejection” (208). Moreover, they assert that the novel also shows the affects and defenses that accompany the shame situation: the self-loathing and self-

disgust, the searing and numbing, paralyzing pain of shame humiliation, the wish to conceal the self in the “attack other” script as reactive desire to shame and humiliates other (208). The additional label of “ugliness” which widened the social gap between the Breedlove’s and others was also to blame for members of the community not stepping in to assist the family in times of need. Members of the community had never really accepted the Breedlove’s, their heritage is unknown, and therefore they are made outcasts. Because of this forced separation, in many ways the community was just as guilty, since abuse was suspected or known, yet, no one tried to intervene on behalf of the children, making those within the community complicit in the abuse of the family and the rape of Pecola.

One of the first introductions of Pecola shows her as a foster child living with the narrator Claudia and her family. Cholly has beat Pauline and burned down the home of the Breedloves. Pecola has come to the McTeer household with nothing, totally separated from her family, and wondering how one goes about getting someone to love them. The insecurities of the parents have been inherited by the daughter in that Pecola is also very much aware of her ugliness, even though she isn’t entirely sure of what makes her ugly. Consequently, Pecola is described as hiding behind her looks to the point where she is praying for invisibility by the age of eleven. She comes to believe that she is capable of making everything disappear except her eyes. She becomes convinced that it is the eyes that make her ugly. If she could get prettier, blue eyes, then she would become accepted by everyone. She also is certain that her new eyes would make her look “different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too (46).” A

little girl had come to have faith in the belief that eye color could make everything in her life better, and that the ones she have are to blame for her having to stay with her family.

To make matters worse, Pecola is not only victimized at home, but she is maltreated at school by both teachers and students. She is forced to be the only student to sit alone in the classroom, she is never looked upon, and the joke of all the boys on the playground. Though she wishes for invisibility she already appears to be invisible to most, even the man who runs the store looks through her in his dealings with her. The only women in the community who show Pecola any semblance of care and concern are the prostitutes, which is ironic in that they are also shunned within the community. So, it was with mixed emotions that the members of the community begin to gossip after the discovery of Pecola's molestation and the resulting pregnancy. The narrator and her sister state that "we listened for one who would say, "Poor little girl," or, "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils (190). It appears that Cholly's greatest sin in the eyes of the community was not the multiple rape and impregnation of his daughter, but the fact that he had at one time burned the house down, potentially leaving his family homeless.

Hence, Morrison's heartbreakingly traumatized character of Pecola Breedlove, victimized by both her parents, and ostracized by the people in her community, has nowhere else to turn but inside her head, the narrator Claudia affirms that:

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. 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. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctifies us, her pain made us glow with health (205).

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for family, neighbors and friends to look away or ignore suspected abuse, as a result, many people have become victims to well-known secrets, the most common being that of sexual abuse in households by immediate family members. Incest is thought to be potentially more injurious to children due to its disruption of the child's primary support system, the family. Usually when a child is abused by someone other than an immediate family member, it is the family who comes to the aid of the child. Incest is also believed to affect the child's ability to trust, particularly when that trust has been destroyed by a loved one.

So traumatized was Pecola by this act of violence that the little girl, who was always ashamed of her appearance, seeks out someone who can help her get the eyes that she so desires. To do this, she visits a man in the community who has her feed poison to a dog that he is afraid to kill. The dog represents to Soaphead church frailty and old age, which he considers to be a form of suffering. So he gets a little girl to do his evil deed, he can also relate to her desire for blue eyes, as he comes from a long line of blacks who have tried to pass as white. The final shock of committing murder in addition to her rape and pregnancy drives Pecola insane. To deal with the rape and the killing of the dog she creates an imaginary friend to help cope with her shame and trauma. In her essay dealing with her personal issues of incest blogger Mona V states that, "Incest is a form of chronic traumatic stress that can lead to a host of initial long-term effects. Like child sexual

abuse in general, it poses a serious mental health risk for many victims.” Not only should Pecola have received help for the sexual abuse, but the resulting mental stress of the various incidents that have happened to her are left untreated also. Beverly Caruso also supposes that “the chronic nature of the abuse, the nature of the family, including its dynamics and defenses, the child’s dependence on and entrapment in the family, and his or her loyalty to that family, necessitate using strong defense mechanisms”(Caruso). However, it doesn’t take a trained professional to realize how complicated and stressful it has to be to live under the same roof as ones abuser. More importantly, someone as important to a child’s mental development as their parents.

Unable to fully accept what has happened to her, and receiving no support from her family or members of her community, Pecola believes that she has received the gift of blue eye and also believe her new eyes are the reason that even her mother is unable to look at her. The assumption that her new gift of blue eyes made her the envy of everyone she encountered is witnessed in a conversation with her imaginary friend, when Pecola asks “Can you imagine? Something like this happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it?” (195). This rejection and disconnection, or fragmentation of her regular thought processes from her normal state of consciousness is what eventually allows Pecola to denounce, reduce or otherwise suppress the memories of her abuse. Perhaps in her denial of her daughter’s rape, Pauline hoped that Pecola would forget, so that she wouldn’t have to address the horrors her daughter has experienced, or that by speaking to her daughter, questions would be asked that she was unwilling or incapable of handling herself. Even more injurious to Pecola is the fact that

Pauline like Cholly took no responsibility in the role in this tragedy, and was either unable or unwilling to support her child.

Pauline's denial or refusal to acknowledge her daughter's collapsed mental state is an example of Janice Haaken's analysis of the Oedipal Complex and how the theory complicates women's willingness to speak out in regards to incest. In her article "The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy and Desire: Feminist Approaches to Sexual Abuse and Trauma" published in 1996, Haaken blames Freud's theory of the oedipal complex for the development of (FMS) or False Memory Syndrome, an organization whose members (parents of abused children), dispute claims of sexual impropriety against their children. Haaken argues that groups such as these make it difficult for women and young girls to come forward and "limits them in the stories that can be told" and that social science and mental health literature tends to decontextualize abuse, often reducing it to a psychological variable. Haaken suggests that Black women writers, however, have "woven accounts of sexual violence into a larger fabric of cultural critique, and the trend within the incest recovery movement has been toward a more narrow psychologizing of sexual abuse" and are apt to place private enactments of violence within a broader dehumanizing context she further states that:

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the rape of Pecola by her father, Cholly, dramatizes a violence that neither begins nor ends with the broken body of the young girl. While the narrative forcefully conveys the horror of the rape, its trauma emerges out of a larger web of destructive experiences and unbearable losses that grip both father and daughter. The designation of perpetrator-the one who is responsible for destroying the

spirit of this black girl-never settles resolutely on the shoulders of the defeated father but shifts in turns in a broader drama of racist brutality (Haaken 1073).

Studies show that dysfunctional families are characterized by problems spanning generations, relatively low socioeconomic standing, and marginal functioning of individual family members and the family as a whole if alcohol or drug abuse is involved (Caruso 6). While it is true that *The Bluest Eye* doesn't totally blame either parent for the daughter's destruction, most criticism tends to exonerate Cholly based on the idea that "because Cholly has been socially conditioned to view himself as an "object of disgust, he "can do nothing other than objectify Pecola, and hence he exploits his daughter "because his own exploitation makes it impossible to do otherwise" and at least... he wanted to touch his daughter" (226). Whereas Pauline, who should have been far more capable of having a humane role in her children's upbringing, decided to avoid her and further neglect her after the rape and pregnancy. Consequently Pauline, so absorbed by her own pursuits of happiness, was completely unable to provide any modicum of protection or interference from negative influences and occurrences in her children's lives, more specifically Pecola's. She used Pecola as another tool and scapegoat in her personal quest for martyrdom. Pecola, having no one in her family or community willing to stand up for, or protect her, went insane, which can be viewed as her coping mechanism. Once again, if one were to fully consider the difficulty which must lie in a child having to live in the same household as its assailant, on a daily basis, then one can image Pecola's horror and the reasoning for this mental withdrawal.

Shelly Wong goes on to blame the community in which the Breedloves live. She claims that although the communities' reaction ranged from disgust, amusement, shock and outrage. Their moral outrage, while purportedly based on the violation of the incest taboo, is clearly based on the violation of culturally sanctioned standards of beauty: "Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly" which is carried over from views of beauty held by White-Americans (480). Although considered as a secondary source, the history of the fictional Breedlove's and their society is based on an occurrence that Morrison experienced as a young girl. The text has been instrumental in allowing women to comfortably write novels and criticisms regarding incest that are therapeutic in many aspects. Morrison has touched on a subject that is to this day one of the most destructive occurrences within any family unit. Her research and analysis on the subject of incest and trauma is prevalent in several of her works such as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved* and *Sula*, making *The Bluest Eye* read as a primary account of the destruction of a Black girl and her family due to incest. Critics such as Breau credit the *Bluest Eye* for the growing list of female-authored novels that contradict the Freudian assertion that most claims of incest are "untrue expressions of forbidden daughterly desire" and for revisions of the oedipal complex that challenge its assumptions that incest claims are invariably false (Breau, 92). She also identifies a need for specific incest therapies and affirms the incest fiction of Black women writers as especially liberating for minority women.

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