

## Misconstruction Of Love And Lack Of Self-Esteem In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye.

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### **Abstract:**

*In The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison explores a lot of themes, among which the misconstruction of love and the lack of self-esteem that are rampant in African American communities. Family love is crucial for the right emotional and psychological development of the offspring. When the parents are not virtuous and loving, the children will certainly grow up without being proud of who they are. They are also likely to lose their self-esteem, while longing for the white dominant culture in a racist society. That is the case of Pecola who craves for blue eyes because they represent the signs of real beauty that girls like her, who are "ugly" dream of possessing. Pecola is so traumatized by the lack of family love and pride that she believes that she is less worth than the other girls. The consequences of that misconstruction of love and the lack of self-esteem have led the little girl to insanity in the racist white dominant American society.*

### **Introduction.**

Besides laying emphasis on racism, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,<sup>1</sup> also deals with the misconstruction of love in an environment of hatred and hostility; which naturally caused a lack of self-esteem for many African American people in the 1950's and 1960's American society.

The book mainly focuses on the complexities of a black girl's life in a community dominated by the white American culture. Pecola lives in a society where she is seen as particularly ugly because of the color of her skin. The poverty of her parents and their regular violent confrontations do not help her to preserve or regain

her self-appreciation through their love and emotional support.

It is obviously unbearable for an eleven year-old girl to resist other people's refusal to accept her for who she is. She automatically becomes a victim of her community since she can never understand people's attitudes towards her. Unfortunately, there is no positive atmosphere at home for Pecola to be proud of her parents and herself. All she needs is true love and acceptance from her family first and the community as well. Failing to have that, her life spawns over years of misunderstanding and suffering.

Authors like Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes, to name but a few, have all dealt with the question of black people's self-esteem and love in post-slavery America. Thus, in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison has explored the impact of racism in that little girl's inner self by laying an emphasis on the horrible damages it can cause.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the misunderstood importance of love and its consequences such as the loss of self-esteem. The first section analyses the misconstruction of love of Pecola's family and community. The second one discusses the little girl's loss of self-esteem which is every individual's most important value. Finally, the third one expounds on the consequences of that misconstruction of love and loss of self-appreciation in the life of the main character: Pecola.

### **I. The Misconstruction of Love.**

One of the general requirements, when starting a family, is to create an atmosphere of love and peace for all its members to live in joy and happiness. However, such a situation can only prosper if the community of the family is sociable and friendly, and where mutual love is present and experienced on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, the family and the community depicted by Toni Morrison in her novel are far cries from those of an ideal world. Even though, Pauline and Cholly seem to share a married-life of love, the reality at home is very different. Their poverty has gradually destroyed their possible infatuation for one another, to end up with a family where parents fight every day, and fail to instill in their offspring mutual love and self-appreciation. It is usually assumed that when violence 'walks' through the door of a room, love 'jumps' out of the window.

She ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face. He sat up, choking and spitting. Naked and ashen, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position her back supported by Sammy's bed frame. She had not let go of the dishpan, and began to hit at Cholly's thighs and groin with it. He put his foot in her chest, and she dropped the pan. Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face, and she might have succumbed early had he not hit his hand against the metal bed frame when his wife ducked (38).

It is hard to imagine the degree of love between Cholly and Pauline. Their fights are so frequent that the love of their children for them, especially for the father, has died out. Sammy, Pecola's younger brother, is even obliged to side with his mother and help her face such a violent father who has built up a family devoid of love and tenderness.

Mrs. Breedlove took advantage of this momentary suspension of blows and slipped out of his reach. Sammy, who had watched in silence their struggling at his bedside, suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fists, shouting "you naked fuck!" over and over and over. Mrs. Breedlove, having snatched up the round, flat stove lid, ran tippy-toe to Cholly as he was pulling himself up from his knees, and struck him

two blows, knocking him right back into the senselessness out of which she had provoked him. Panting she threw a quilt over him and let him lie. Sammy screamed, "Kill him! Kill him!" (38-39).

When a little boy proposes his mother to kill his father, it is quite obvious that all the love, that should have united them and created an atmosphere of security and happiness, has been annihilated.

However, Toni Morrison implies that the horrible situation at the Breedloves is caused by the racist system they live in. Racism does not breed love but kills it, leading the traumatized people to the state of breeding violence. Nevertheless, Pauline still has family feelings towards her husband and children and despite the difficulties she faces in her life, she refuses to abandon them to go and live with her white woman employer. She certainly understands that she will never be happy there, or will even face more traumas because of a false and impossible humane and human relationship with that "Samaritan".

Even though Pauline's marriage collapses into a cycle of violence and unsatisfying sex, she refuses to leave Cholly for the white woman and a romanticized concept of 'sisterhood'. For Pauline race becomes more important than gender. 'But later on it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman'. As becomes clear from the monologues which betray the complexity of her situation, her experience of how white doctors treat white women differently from black women is crucial to her

rejection of the concept of 'sisterhood' (Peach, 178-179).

For Morrison, poverty breeds misconception of love. In the community, the white families as well as the wealthy black ones associate poverty with ugliness. In fact for them, the two notions feed on one another. Poor people are ugly and people are ugly because they are poor. Confining some people into ugliness naturally leads to misconstruing love and generating hatred. Such a situation reminds us of the relationship between Heed and Christine in *Love*(2003) by Toni Morrison. The two girls vie endlessly for Cosey's love and affection and consequently that rivalry ultimately develops a dark animosity for one another.

The Breedloves are the poorest and obviously the ugliest people in their community. Even their home falls into that categorization.

The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly (34).

However, although poverty is a sad reality for the family, ugliness is for Toni Morrison something that the Breedloves have taken for granted. In fact, they are very much convinced that poverty cannot be dissociated with ugliness. Consequently, love can, therefore, neither exist nor prosper in their lives. Ugliness is, therefore, in

the state of a mind, or an imaginary thing that people see because they want to.

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "you are ugly people." They had nothing looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. "Yes" they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it (34).

With the dislocation of the family, the possibility of conceiving real love disappears, and Cholly who is at the source of the misconception joins the world of animals.

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail (18-19).

That animalism of the father later reaches its paroxysm when he rapes his own daughter in

the kitchen, turning the normal fatherly love for a child into a carnal one materialized by a painful sexual intercourse for the poor little girl.

Morrison does have sympathy for Cholly (she admits that she connects "Cholly's 'rape' by the white men to his own of his daughter", but he is not absolved, he dies soon after in a workhouse. And Morrison does not minimize the crime against his daughter. Pecola's childlike "stunned silence", "the tightness of her vagina" the painfully gigantic thrust, "her fingers clenching", her shocked body", and finally her unconsciousness bear witness to Morrison's aim in the novel to represent Pecola's perspective, to translate her heartbreak (Furman, 188-189).

Although, the misconstruction of love within the family is mainly caused by the father, he benefits from attenuating circumstances for Toni Morrison. In fact, Cholly did not know any love in his childhood. After being abandoned by her mother's lover Cholly's father, his mother turns him into a foundling that is saved by Aunt Jimmy. Despite all his efforts to be united with his father, the latter rejects him. At no time did Cholly experience parental love while growing up.

Cholly's rape of Pecola is not a conscious and deliberate act, according to Toni Morrison, but it is rather a culmination of the consequences of the psychological, social and personal depreciation undergone in a white dominant society that has constantly "raped" Cholly since his childhood.

After being abandoned by his parents, the most formatively

brutalizing incident in Cholly's youth was the interruption of his first sexual encounter by armed whites. The experience of being forced by the white hunters to continue relations with his partner constitutes a trauma not only in its humiliating intensity, but also in the impossibility of his being able to react to the situation (Vickoy, 206).

Living in a family and a community which are both victims of the system set up on ostracism and rejection because of the difference of skin color, Pecola feels neither loved, nor appreciated, and that makes her completely lose all her self-esteem.

## **II. Pecola's Loss of her Self-Esteem.**

Self-esteem is nothing but a favorable opinion of oneself or the fact of being appreciative of one's physical, intellectual and moral person. The messages Toni Morrison conveys in the *Bluest Eye* as well as in *Love* revolve around the importance of communication, self-esteem, education, soul-searching, relationships and human nature which are all universal, timeless and transcending gender and race. Life in a community implies differences between people, so much so that everyone should be proud of themselves. The trauma of Pecola is to have been born in a family and a society where love is misconstrued, and ugliness instilled in poor black people's minds. The misconstruction of love and the feeling of ugliness, experienced within the African American world, even transcend the state of poverty in most American cities. According to Esti Sugihardi:

Consequently in trying to conform to the ideal of white femininity, the

black women characters despise their blackness which in turn leads to self-hatred. They see themselves through the eyes of white people and their worship of white beauty also has destructive effects on their own community (Sugihardi, 2012).

The novel poignantly epitomizes the psychological devastation of the little girl who has a strong desire for being loved and accepted in a world that rejects and devalues people of her ilk. Feminine beauty is a social reality in a community under the aegis of the patriarchal system. In such a traditional way of life, women, apart from being considered as the "weaker sex", sensitive, hysterical and overemotional, are also expected to be beautiful, sensual and attractive to men in order to fulfill their social responsibility of seduction and charm. That gender role is, according to Lois Tyson, a consequence of social constructionism and not biological:

In other words women are not born feminine, and men are not born masculine. Rather, these gender categories are constructed by society, which is why this view of gender is an example of what has come to be called social constructionism (Tyson, 2006).

As early as their childhood, girls are taught the importance of beauty and attractiveness to remain valuable human beings in a patriarchal society. Thus, women and girls who are not within that framework of the "social norms" of beauty are ostracized and despised, especially in a world of racism like the American one. In fact the conventional conception of beauty is understood there as being white-skinned with blonde hair and blue eyes.

Consequently, the African American woman or girl, who does not receive much love

and support from role model parents showing pride of their selves as black people, is likely to hate, in various degrees, anything associated with their own race. As a matter of fact, they blindly accept white Americans' deep intention to make them believe that they are ugly and unlovable, particularly at a time when black cultural standards of beauty were missing.

No wonder therefore, that Pecola feels that nobody wants to look at her or to show some recognition to her person. She notices in everybody's eyes a horrible and destroying look akin to the one experienced by her father when surprised having sex with Darlene by two white men. "*Cholly moving faster looked at Darlene. He hated her*" (117).

Like Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, Pecola takes it for granted that she is invisible insofar as nobody seems to see her because of her terrible ugliness. Unlike Ellison's Invisible Man who is conscious that people refuse to see him because he is black, Pecola believes that the members of her community cannot see her as a consequence of her being ugly.

As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people. Somehow she belonged to them. 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. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk (39).

The three whores, living upstairs the Breedloves' apartment, are the only members of the community that converse with her and seem to have accepted her for who she is. However,

Pecola logically wants more recognition from her classmates and the other adults in the community. Since that is not unfortunately the case, the little girl is persuaded that she will only be loved, looked at and appreciated if she has got blue eyes.

What Toni Morrison implies in Pecola's attitude is the acceptance of low self-worth resulting from years of being put down. That has, in fact, made her feel or even see her ugliness as something realistic, natural and not a psychological means of racist Whites to emotionally and physically destroy her. It not thus surprising, that a lot of African American women of the 50s, 60s and 70s were very fond of blemishing their skins, putting whigs of artificial hair and coloring their eyes to look like white women; all that with the hope to be "lovable and charming".

In the western society, the fact of being blonde with blue eyes is often seen as a sign of beauty. No wonder, therefore, that dolls, like the one that was given to Claudia as a Christmas present, are made with fair hair and very blue eyes. Even some candies, like the one called Mary Jane, are made with pretty blue eyes for children to buy them.

The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named (43).

Consequently, Pecola starts despising her own eyes and longing for blue ones. Her dream is to be accepted and looked at by the community,



thus losing once for all her self-esteem for want of something unrealistic and unreasonable.

"I can't go to school no more. And I thought maybe you can help

me".

Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened."

"My eyes."

"What about your eyes?"

"I want them blue" (137).

Realizing that God may not answer her daily prayers, Pecola decides to visit Sopehead Church, a reader, an adviser and an interpreter of dreams. The man, though a pedophile, is so touched by the little girl's request that he does not even think of molesting her.

Such a loss of self-esteem is something Sopehead is trying to get through his head to be able to help Pecola redeem her real personality. Noticing the desperate state of mind of the little girl, the old man is obliged to poison a dog to give her some hope.

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it neat and right to do so (143).

When Sopehead says that no one will see her blue eyes but she will, he naturally implies that people can proudly live in a fool's paradise or in their own world, if they are in a certain state of mind. Beauty may be understood as a personal perception or a social one. In either case, good-

looking is questionable, insofar as it is relative because the view of the society may not commensurate with the individual's one, and vice-versa.

However, Pecola has been so traumatized by blue eyes that she is convinced that Sopehead's miracle has turned her into a beautiful blue-eyed girl. She now believes that she is no longer a marginal human being, but a true American girl in accordance with the standards of feminine beauty defined by a society dominated by white males. That supposed extraordinary achievement of Sopehead and the misconstruction of love, that has shaped the little girl's attitude, do have some consequences in her life.

### III. The Consequences of the Loss of Self-Esteem and Misconstruction of Love.

Because of the discrimination and racism that are rampant in the community, love is not only misconstrued within the Breedlove family, but it has also completely disappeared from there. Cholly and Pauline's regular fights are far from being expressions of true love in a couple's married-life. Besides that, the husband does not care about his family's well-being. He is more concerned with his alcoholic beverages and sexual intercourses than anything else. *"Even from where Pecola lay, she could smell Cholly's whiskey"* (35).

It is in that vein that he rapes his own daughter, because he has never felt any paternal love for her. Cholly has never been the right father taking good care of his children, and protecting them against all the horrors in the community. Cholly has always lived in his own world of a traumatized child and an irresponsible father.

Removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry

harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred would not let him pick her up; the tenderness forced him to cover her (128-129).

Such a despicable act is nothing else but the main consequence of the general misconstruction of love in the family, where the real meaning of such a feeling has never been understood by both parents and children. For Toni Morrison people with no imagination, like Cholly, feed love with sex. Such people do not know the real kinds or the better kinds where, according to Morrison, losses are cut and everybody benefits. Unfortunately for the author, it takes a certain intelligence to express genuine parental love in an ostracized group of people within a given community.

When Sammy asks his mother to kill his father, it is simply because he feels neither love nor admiration for him. When Pecola tells her mother what has happened in the kitchen, she does not believe her out of lack of true maternal love and protection that any little girl that has gone through such a nightmarish incestuous act needs. *"You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her"* (155). The mother's insensitive and insensible attitude towards her daughter's pain certainly derives from her strong desire to keep the family from dislocating. She prefers to turn a deaf ear to Pecola's trauma in order to send to the community the impression that, though poor and ugly, the Breedloves still hold together, despite all the problems they face.

The fact of not believing her daughter epitomizes the misconstruction of love on the part of Mrs. Breedlove. No wonder, then, that the little girl always feels unloved by her own family and

hated by the outside world. How could she not lose her self-esteem, insofar as she believes that all that has happened to her is the result of her blackness and ugliness?

Unlike Pecola's relationships with her parents, Romen and her grandparents, in *Love*, live in a good atmosphere of communication. Sandler has adopted an effective way of showing his love to his grandson. That has obviously helped the young man grow into a strong human being. Moreover, Romen and his actions are examples of goodness that can be achieved when older people take the time to carefully and lovingly instill in their offspring good social values.

Toni Morrison also implies that education is crucial when struggling in a racist environment where true love is often problematic. For instance Junior, in *Love*, is conscious enough and because she is well educated, she knows that self-love is at the heart of survival in a hostile community. Consequently, she relies on her brain and common sense to stay strong. Heed, on the other hand, is ignorant (through no fault of her own) and she relies on manipulation and deceit to get by and, being a non educated child, mistakenly believes that her marriage with Cosey is her way out. Pecola's low level of education and the hardships of the circumstances have contributed, a great deal, to her lack of self-esteem.

When people despise themselves, they may not only lose their self-esteems, but they may even lose their minds in the long run. At the end of the story, Pecola is talking to herself as an imaginary friend, proving her insanity that has been caused by her strong desire for something impossible to obtain, and that the community has goaded her to crave for. *"I don't know. After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes. Well, the next day they had Mrs. Breedlove come out. Now I don't go anymore. But I don't care"* (153).



Religious people might say that, God has decreed that people who despise themselves may end up losing their whole selves after losing their self-esteems.

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green 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, 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 (158).

Since she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's 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.

### Conclusion.

Love and self-esteem are so much interconnected that Toni Morrison addresses them in a straightforward way in *the Bluest Eye*. When love is not present in a family and a community, the consequences are mistrust, hatred, violence, even racism and physical confrontations. Both the father and mother did not experience real love in their childhoods and their married life is devoid of any sign of mutual appreciation. Toni Morrison shows that love and self-esteem are transmitted to children who will be future parents by their own ones. If that is not the case, most children are likely to live the same horrors as the poor little girl in a patriarchal society, where the conditions of beauty are defined by a white male dominant society.

Although Breedlove is the name of their family, Cholly, Pauline, Pecola and Sammy have not experienced the breeding of love, because of the horrible social conditions they have lived in a dominant white culture of the American society. That non existence of real and true love has allowed hatred and racism to prosper in the hearts of white people, while the black ones, such as Pecola, are likely to lose their self-esteems up to the point of denying the importance of their brown eyes, and longing for blue ones, for the sake of beauty and acceptance by others. Unfortunately, people like Pecola have never understood that those who despise their own selves are bound to lose their whole selves through insanity or even death.

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## Resumé.

Dans *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison aborde plusieurs problèmes inhérents à la communauté africaine américaine. Parmi ceux-ci, la mauvaise conception de l'amour et le manque d'estime de sa personne occupent une place prépondérante. L'amour familial est capital dans le développement psychologique et émotionnel des enfants. Quand les parents ne sont pas fiers de leur culture ou de leur race et adoptent des comportements irresponsables, ils transmettent à leur progéniture un mépris de soi et un désir

ardent d'embrasser la culture dominante des blancs de la société américaine. L'exemple de Pecola montre l'absence d'amour parental et le manque d'estime personnelle qui ont conduit cette petite fille noire et "laide" à vouloir devenir belle, à tout prix, grâce à des yeux bleus. Selon Toni Morrison, les conséquences de la mauvaise conception de l'amour et le manque d'estime de soi peuvent mener à la folie à cause des pressions sociales racistes dans une société américaine dominée par la culture blanche.