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# The Merits of Anger: "Put Out" and "Being Outdoors" in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

THE MERITS OF ANGER  
“Put Out” and “Being Outdoors” in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

Submitted by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgments.....  | i  |
| Introduction.....   | ii |
| Chapter One: The Black Community's Relationship with Society .....  | 1  |
| Chapter Two: The Black Community's Internal Relationship .....      | 11 |
| Chapter Three: Pecola's Relationship with the Black Community ..... | 22 |
| Conclusion .....  | 33 |
| Bibliography .....  | 37 |

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## INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* is at its core a reflection on the exclusivity of white society, the impossibility of living by the standards of white, middle-class values and living up to the standards of white beauty, and the injustice of being black in a white world. However, an often-overlooked aspect of the novel is the different ways in which the characters are excluded as well as the different people who exclude them and the different places they are excluded from. Morrison's novel not only analyzes the interactions between white society and the black community within a Midwest American town, but offers a look into how these interactions are interpreted and dealt with within the communities affected. The complexity created by the interactions of multiple groups within the novel can best be understood through deconstructing the novel into three key entities, each with their own characters and issues. These three entities include society as a whole, the black community, and Pecola herself. In an ideal world, these entities would be nested into one another like Matryoshka dolls: Pecola would be located within the black community, which would be located within society as a whole. However, that is not the case within *The Bluest Eye*, just as it is not the case within the real world. The various interactions between and among these three groups allow for a closer analysis of the different ways in which a group or individual can be marginalized, and how this marginalization manifests itself.

Claudia, the novel's clearest, most dominant, and arguably its strongest narrator, offers the frame through which the relationship between these three entities can be

understood. While describing Cholly Breedlove's offenses against his family, Claudia explains that "there is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go...Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life" (Morrison 17). This passage is crucial to an in depth understanding of the novel in that it exemplifies the underlying fear of members of the black community as a whole: exclusion from society as a whole as well as from the only community that offers them acceptance. According to Denise Heinze, Morrison's novels tend to place more value in the community than in the individual in terms of economic and personal interest (Heinze 107). However, within *The Bluest Eye*, these seemingly opposing sets of values go hand in hand: an individual who is completely isolated, or outdoors, from both society *and* her community is unable to find success in any endeavor, and will ultimately fall victim to the world in which she lives.

The black community can be seen as outdoors from society as a whole, which is motivated by white middle-class values and a white standard of beauty. This means that the black community is not only excluded from the larger, white-dominated society, but also that its exclusion, or "outdoorsness" is felt in a painful and obvious way. Claudia explains that their socio-economic exclusion from the white middle-class that is so idealized within society is "something we had learned to deal with--probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter" (Morrison 17-18). Her explanation demonstrates that the idea of being outdoors is a physical representation of the black community's pre-existing outdoorsness from society. It is the most dreaded and cruel thing one person can do to another because it makes the abstract

concrete. In this passage, Claudia situates the black community's position within society by linking the idea of being outdoors to "being a minority in both caste and class" (Morrison 17). Morrison creates a metaphor in which the black community is outdoors from society in that they are totally and completely isolated. There truly is, as Claudia states, "no place to go" (Morrison 17).

Being outdoors is different than being put out in that when an individual or community is put out from an entity, it is still accepted by the larger entity. Claudia's hatred of and inability to love the dolls that "represented what [adults] thought was my fondest wish", or white beauty, excludes her from the community of the other black girls her age: she does not belong in the same category as girls like Freida and Pecola, who adore these girls and their real-life equivalent, Shirley Temple (Morrison 20). However, her exclusion is not absolute: though she is chastised for abusing her dolls, ultimately Claudia is still an accepted member of the black community as a whole.

Another distinction between being outdoors and being put out is the finality of being outdoors. Once an individual or a community, in this case the black community, is outdoors, there is no coming back inside. To be outdoors is "an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition" (Morrison 17). The condition of being outdoors is so serious, in fact, that Claudia likens it to death. The analogy that the difference between being put out and being outdoors was "like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead" (Morrison 17-18) points out the seriousness and finality of being outdoors as a condition and also shows how essential it is for individuals to belong somewhere. The passage describes not only the black community's relationship to society as a whole, but also the relationship between black individuals and

the black community. Belonging to the black community is not only desired, but absolutely necessary in order for their survival. Already outdoors from society because of their social, economic, and most importantly their racial status, to be excluded from the only community willing to accept them would leave them completely isolated and unsupported. In short, being outdoors is akin to death.

Because of the necessity of belonging, the culture created by the black community is almost more important than the culture created by society as a whole. One might think that this separation of culture would create an environment in which the black community would create its own unique culture in which “blackness” is both appreciated and considered beautiful. Within this separate black culture, the values of white middle-class culture would become less prominent and the painful feelings of exclusion would consequently lessen (Dubey 33). Morrison herself wonders within her introduction why a black standard of beauty “could...not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation to exist?” (Morrison xi) However, instead of creating a unique subculture, the black community only further perpetuates the white values and ideals forced on them by society. Through its idolization of white culture as well as its unquestioning acceptance of socially constructed stereotypes and rules, black characters within the novel create a community that is devoted to the status quo (Bouson 29). Much like the Breedloves are described as having a “mysterious and all-knowing master...[give] each one of them a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question”, it is as though the black community accepts the judgment and decisions of the white community without any hesitation (Morrison 39).

Their treatment of one another highlights an interesting side effect of the black community's unflinching acceptance of society's impossible standards. Although faced with the pain of not only being excluded from the community, but also the frustration and anger at being unable to live up to the unrealistic standards of white middle-class values and white beauty, the black community is still unable to direct their anger onto the white society responsible for their oppression. It is as if the black community cannot psychologically handle hating the white people that society tells them are the ideal. Because the black community cannot hate its oppressors, it instead turns to hating itself. Various members of the black community are constantly displacing their own feelings of being outsiders onto others within the community, as if perpetuating the pain of being outsiders will somehow ease their own (Bouson 25). For example, even before he rapes his daughter, Cholly Breedlove is an outsider from the black community because he is a visible and tangible reminder of the feelings many other members of the black community have. While the community looks down on Cholly for his drinking, his disregard for property, and his treatment of his family, in reality he represents the anger and frustration many members of the community feel, and the fact that he takes it out on his family is an extreme version of what happens among the adults in the community every day (Bouson 25). Although most children are safe from sexual abuse at the hands of their own fathers, the children in the novel are nonetheless constantly scapegoated, always being scolded or yelled at for things that are not their fault, and are treated often with disdain and annoyance by the adults. Essentially, everyone in the black community is guilty of taking their anger about their own treatment and injustice at the hands of white people out on their families, and Cholly reminds them of their own hypocrisy.

Finally, Pecola is placed outdoors by the majority of the black community as she finds even less acceptance than a typical member of the community might find: her classmates and teachers pick on her and she does not get any support from within her family. The community sees her and her family as ugly, and Pecola is singled out for her helplessness as the ultimate victim. However, even though the community places her outdoors, she perpetuates her social location as part of her own coping mechanism. Either because she is not strong enough to stand up for herself or else is unable to understand the positive aspects that anger and frustration can afford her, Pecola never learns how to successfully turn her self-hatred outward onto society or her own community. Her self-exclusion can be seen in many ways, mainly in her interactions with the few people who befriend her or show her kindness within the novel. As the plot progresses it becomes clear that although the community places Pecola outdoors, she builds the fence that keeps her there. Either because she is not strong enough to stand up for herself or else is unable to understand the positive aspects that anger and frustration can afford her, Pecola never learns how to successfully and sustainably turn her self-hatred outward onto society or her own community. The only way for her to mentally cope with society's rejection of her is to remove herself from any reminder that she is outdoors at all. Her self-exclusion from the black community is a double-edged sword: while it protects her from the self-hatred that would ultimately lead to an unbearable existence, it also contributes to her vulnerability and helplessness as a member of the black community.

## CHAPTER ONE: THE BLACK COMMUNITY'S RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

In order to best understand *The Bluest Eye*, one must first understand the most obvious as well as the most analyzed and discussed aspect of the novel: the relationship between society and the black community. While this is perhaps the most superficial relationship in that it is the easiest to detect and deconstruct, it nonetheless forms the basis for every relationship within the novel. The deeper and more complex relationships that make *The Bluest Eye* a masterful work (the relationship between the black community and itself and the relationship between Pecola and the black community) do not exist without this relationship between society and the black community. Within her introduction, Morrison states that *The Bluest Eye* is an attempt to answer the question that plagues anyone who looks deeply into the idea of a white standard of beauty: who decides that the white ideal is *the* ideal? And, more specifically, how is this ideal perpetuated throughout the masses? In the case of Pecola especially, “who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?” (Morrison xi). *The Bluest Eye* offers an analysis of what exactly is “the gaze that condemned” black people living in a white society (Morrison xi). The novel identifies what specifically the white ideal is, how it is clearly defined through the use of dolls, celebrities, the cinema, and other forms of media, and the ways in which black people attempt to conform to the ideal. Through an analysis of these identifications, it is clear that the community feels immeasurable pain at their outdoorsness because despite the suggestion that their conformity to social ideals will

lead to acceptance, no matter what measures they take to exemplify whiteness they still find themselves outdoors.

The ideal of whiteness can be seen as a combination of “white” features as the standard of beauty and the white middle-class values that permeate the novel and society as a whole. It is no coincidence then that the novel opens with a scene from a Dick and Jane reader. The scene depicts the ideal middle-class life: a beautiful house with an All-American family consisting of a mother, a father, a son, a daughter, and a cat.

Descriptions such as “Mother is very nice”, “Mother laughs”, “See Father. He is big and strong”, “Father is smiling”, and “the friend will play with Jane” all serve to express the idealism of the scene (Morrison 3). The nuclear family is happy and interacting well, the children have companions, and everyone is able to fill their role with ease (Bouson 22). Despite the idealism of this passage, however, it is clear that this is not a realistic standard that many families can live up to. The repetition of the passage over and over and the gradual deconstruction of the grammatical structure of the passage suggest that to attempt to live up to this standard only results in a chaos (Furman 19). The reader begins normally, with even, although simplistic spacing and punctuation: “Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door” (Morrison 3). However, first the punctuation drops, and then the spacing itself, until the passage reads “hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddoor” (Morrison 4). This deconstruction demonstrates that the black community’s attempt to match their lives to this white middle-class ideal will lead to a confusion ideas, just as the passage becomes so squeezed together that one word blends into the next (Furman 21).

The tone of the Dick and Jane reader also shows the impracticability of attempting to conform to societal norms. The overly simplistic, sing-song tone of the passage suggests that it is immature and naive to think that this ideal fits in with every family regardless of their location within society (Dubey 35). The repetition of the passage is representative of the fact that, regardless of the seemingly obvious impracticability and specificity of the white middle-class ideal, this ideal is beaten over and over again into the minds of society as a whole. More specifically, the fact that the passage is extracted from a Dick and Jane reader exemplifies that this ideal is introduced and indeed already deeply ingrained within the children of both white society and the black community from a very early age.

Though it is introduced at the start of the novel and diffused throughout the work as a whole, this ideal of whiteness is most obviously and significantly represented through the idolization of Shirley Temple and white baby dolls. Physically, it is clear that these figures represent the standard of white beauty: they have dimples, curls, blond hair, blue eyes, and white skin. However, on a deeper level these objects are what Jan Furman refers to as part of the “process and symbols of imprinting the self during childhood” (Furman 12). These figures also have characteristics that, while not necessarily physical, are inextricably linked to their physical characteristics. In the case of Shirley Temple, her bubbly personality and her popularity amongst both children her own age and the adults she is surrounded by solidifies her status as the ideal child. It becomes impossible for children, who are the target audience of Shirley Temple, to differentiate between Shirley Temple’s idealized white beauty and her popularity and quality of life. An example of this linkage can be found in Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola’s conversation about Shirley

Temple, which is sparked after Pecola is served milk in a cup with Shirley Temple's image on it. Firstly, the fact that there is such a cup within the house is an example of the extent to which the specific image of the white standard of beauty permeates every aspect of society. The image of Pecola, who is "a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face" suggests that the idolization of white beauty has already begun for these young black girls (Morrison 19). This idolization is further exemplified by Pecola and Frieda's conversation "about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was" and the "adoration" the two girls feel towards this figure of white beauty (Morrison 19).

Although Claudia does not share Pecola and Frieda's idolization of Shirley Temple, she is still able to understand that Shirley Temple's beauty is connected in some way to her status as a happy, healthy, well-liked little girl. Claudia explains that she "hated Shirley...because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (Morrison 19). Claudia understands that she is in some way inadequate or less than Shirley Temple, and implies that Shirley Temple can come into any community, any home, and be the favorite of whomever the Bojangles of that specific place is (Heinze 17). Without being able to specifically name why, Claudia knows instinctively that in any situation, Shirley Temple will be adored by the friend, uncle, or father that a black girl may have simply because she is white and lives up to, or rather defines, the white standard of beauty.

The dolls given to the children within the black community are another example of the ways in which young children are introduced to the white ideal of beauty from a young age. The dolls suggest that even before children are old enough to be influenced by

the ideals of white middle-class values present in the Dick and Jane reader, they are still taught which characteristics are beautiful, or good, and which ones are ugly, or bad (Bousoon 32). The physical characteristics of the “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll” that “all the world had agreed...was what every child treasured” more firmly establish what has already been ingrained in children such as Pecola and Frieda: that to be white is somehow to be right, and to be black is bad (Morrison 20). Interestingly enough, it is again Claudia who cannot understand the idolization of the dolls. Unlike her peers, she “could not love [them]”, and is often motivated to destroy and torture her dolls (Morrison 21). Claudia’s reactions to both her doll and Shirley Temple show that despite the fact that she considers herself immature, claiming that she “had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love” these figures of white beauty, she is in fact one of the few characters within the novel who is able to see Shirley Temple and the dolls for what they really are. In unusual sophistication, Claudia interacts with these figures not because she loves them or idolizes them, but because she wishes to “examine [them] to see what the world said was loveable” (Morrison 21). Despite her young age, Claudia asks the question that is central to the anger, frustration, and pain that results from the black community’s outdoorsness from society: “what made people look at them and say, ‘Awwww,’ but not for me?” (Morrison 22)

While the idolization of Shirley Temple and the dolls is perhaps more age specific, another way in which the white ideal permeates society as a whole is through the media, and specifically the cinema. Pauline’s experiences with the cinema offer an example of both what the white ideal is and how that ideal is spread throughout society as

a whole. Pauline, who is not introduced to the cinema until her adult years, finds that she is “never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty”, and in this way the cinema introduces her to “the most destructive idea in the history of human thought”: physical beauty (Morrison 122). Through learning to identify what is beautiful and what is not through the lens of society Pauline comes to subconsciously understand her own inadequacy, and consequently her perceived ugliness (Bouson 25). The cinema serves as the primary lens through which Pauline sees herself and creates what J. Brooks Bouson calls “the mirage of themselves generated by their reference group--that group in society which they see as defining them” (Bouson 25). Through its characters and stories, the cinema educates Pauline in all the ideals of whiteness that she can never live up to. Jean Harlow teaches Pauline what is the “good” way to wear her hair, Clark Gable demonstrates what a real man should be, and the interactions between the white men and women on the screen show Pauline how she will be treated provided she lives up to this standard of beauty (Matus 41). For both black adults and children, physical beauty is linked to emotional happiness.

Pauline’s experiences with the cinema and her education on what it means to be beautiful also serve to demonstrate the power of the white ideal. Heinze points out that the white ideal, especially in terms of the standard of beauty, is “one of the most dangerous societal constructs because, by placing value on a very limited set of physical criteria, it can reduce human beings on sight to objects” (Heinze, 15). This reduction is not difficult to see throughout the novel: the storekeeper is unable to focus on Pecola, seeing her only as a kind of coin machine to which he must give candy; other black

women refuse to offer their friendship to Pauline because they cannot recognize her humanity when she does not relax her hair or wear “white” clothing; the white men who emasculate Cholly reduce him to an object of entertainment, instead of seeing him as a young boy engaged in the most personal act of his life (Samuels et. al. 18). The white ideal is responsible for objectifying the black characters within the novel, and ultimately it is the most powerful force within the novel. It “has the power to disenfranchise a child of mother love, to psychically splinter an entire race identity, and to imprison all human beings in static and stagnant relationships” (Heinze 15).

However, the hypocrisy of society’s standard of beauty and the white ideal is that, although it is suggested that if the black community conforms to these ideals they will be accepted and let back indoors, the reality is the black community is permanently outdoors of society regardless of their actions. Interestingly enough, the society that is dominated by white culture is able to oppress the black subculture while at the same time creating within the subculture a desperate desire to belong to this society. The black members of society do their best to fit into and live up to the white ideal that so heavily permeates society: Pauline, the three prostitutes, Mr. Henry, and many other adults within the novel model their hair after white movie stars and tame it using Nu Nile Hair Oil; Geraldine has her son’s hair cropped as closely to his head as possible so it does not look like “black hair”, even having a part shaved into it; those with lighter skin, such as Maureen Peal and Soaphead Church, consider themselves above the darker members of the black community and often discriminate against those darker than they; many even pretend to be white, such as Pecola in her quest for blue eyes, Geraldine in the upper class of the black community, and Pauline in a position of power within her white employer’s home

(Heinze 130). These examples of black characters attempting to live up to the white ideal demonstrate the black characters' conformity to Victor Turner's idea of *communitas*. As quoted by Denise Heinze in her book *Dilemma of "Double Consciousness"*, Turner states that *communitas* "tends to characterize relationships between those jointly undergoing ritual transition" (Heinze 105). Through this definition, the black community's attempt at conformity can be seen as the ritual transition that all members must undergo. Just like Claudia must learn to show love toward her white dolls, the community must learn to adapt to white culture in order to be accepted within the black culture.

However, despite these attempts at conformity the black community is continually reminded that they are not and will never be fully accepted into society because no matter how much they place themselves above other members of the black community, they are still outdoors from the white ideal. For Geraldine, her conformity to white middle-class values does not prevent her from being emotionally, sexually, and intellectually unsatisfied with her position in life. Pauline's position of power within her white employer's home does not translate into power in society for herself personally, as even doctors in the hospital explain that black women do not need much attention since they deliver babies easily and painlessly "just like horses" (Morrison 125). Even Maureen Peal, the light-skinned and wealthy girl who is as close to white society as anyone within the novel, is not accepted by her white peers but rather not picked on. "White boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners", and yet she is never actually welcomed into the white world (Morrison 62; Bouson 25). Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Pecola's desperate quest for blue eyes does not result in society, the black community, or her family treating her any better,

but rather leads her to descend into madness. These instances are merely a few examples of the ways in which the black community is taught again and again that no matter how hard they may try, no matter how close they may be to the white ideal, they will never be accepted into white society. Their status as outsiders of society has never been and will never be reversed.

All these aspects of the novel demonstrate that *The Bluest Eye* offers an interesting insight into the relationship between white society and the black community. Society oppresses the black community through determining the ways in which the black community is placed outdoors from society as a whole. However, at the same time the black community is unable to ignore their own desire to conform to this society. Through the use of dolls, television figures such as Shirley Temple, the cinema, and other forms of media, the white ideal is defined very clearly and succinctly. However, not only is this standard an unrealistic expectation for the black community due to their economic and social disadvantages as well as the immutability of their race, but it also serves to remind them of their own inadequacies. Their failure to live up to the standard “[leans] at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance”, and serves as a constant reminder of their exclusion from white society (Morrison 39). The glaring contrast between the members of the black community’s own lives from those of the idealized middle-class presented in the Dick and Jane reader becomes another way for white society to humiliate the black community and create within this community a sense of worthlessness and inadequacy (Bousoon 32). In other words, the white ideal portrayed by society is the fence that keeps the black community outdoors from the larger society: it is a physical,

emotional, and very much visible reminder that the black community can never be as “good” or as “beautiful” as the rest of society because they can never live up to this ideal.

## CHAPTER TWO: THE BLACK COMMUNITY'S INTERNAL RELATIONSHIP

Although it is ultimately society that places the black community outdoors, *The Bluest Eye* portrays the majority of the black community as the keepers of this segregation and inequality. With the exception of Claudia, and at times Frieda, the entire novel is filled with black characters who perpetuate the stereotypes society has created for them and also actively aid in the oppression of other individuals within the community. Because of this, while the black community is placed outdoors by society, they are kept outdoors by their own actions and attitudes towards each other and their misplaced feelings towards the society that has alienated them so harshly and absolutely.

As previously discussed, the relationship between the black community and the larger, predominantly white society is a complicated one. Society oppresses and alienates the black community while at the same time cultivates within this community an intense and desperate desire to belong to the society dominated by white middle-class values (Dubey 40). Despite the fact that the black community has been placed outdoors by white society, the black community perpetuates their own outdoorsness by playing into the hands of society. When the lives of black individuals fail to match up to the Dick and Jane reader model of white middle-class values or the individuals themselves fail to meet the white standard of beauty, instead of hating the society that places these unrealistic expectations upon them, they turn instead to self-hatred (Furman 16). In order to prevent this self-hatred from becoming all consuming and self-destructive (as it will later become in the case of Pecola), the individuals of the black community find ways to displace their

own anger and pain onto other members of the community. Michael Awkward calls this behavior “purgative abuse”, and labels it as a mark of the black community’s inescapable guilt about its failure to meet the white standards of living and beauty that are subtly and yet clearly placed upon the black community (Awkward 11-12).

The most obvious example of this purgative abuse within the novel can be found in the adults’ relationship to the children. The hierarchy of any community is usually structured around a stereotypical nuclear family: men at the top, followed by women and lastly children. The black hierarchal structure within *The Bluest Eye* is no different, but unlike within the white community, the black children’s status as the lowest members of the community makes these children particularly vulnerable to the abuse of both black men and women struggling to exorcise their own guilt and self-loathing. On some level, the adults within the novel understand their unjust treatment of the children and the pain they inevitably cause them, although they seem unable to fully come to terms with why it is that they scapegoat them so heavily (Bouson 25). In Pauline’s narrative, there is a rare moment of contrition when Pauline states that, “I loved them and all, I guess, but...Sometimes I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I’d feel sorry for them, but I couldn’t seem to stop” (Morrison 124). It is as though the black community, and specifically black adults, are constantly conflicted (Bouson 26). On one hand, they have a love of and familial responsibility towards those lower down in the hierarchical chain than they. However, they also experience frustration and pain at their failure to live up to the unreasonable expectations this society has placed so unreasonably on them, and consequently they feel the injustice of being put outdoors from this same society. Black women within the community especially feel this conflict. They

understand what it is like to receive purgative abuse from their husbands, but at the same time cannot seem to control themselves from passing this abuse on to their children: “when white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other” (Morrison 138). The black community is consequently wrapped up in a kind of hypocrisy where adults physically, verbally, emotionally, and, in the case of Cholly, sexually abuse those they love most in an attempt to, as Bouson states, “temporarily rid themselves of their shame by humiliating others” (Bouson 25). The circular nature of these characters’ abuse of each other is an example of how “black survival responses to oppression inevitably merge into strange and destructive behavior that is a consistent, unbreakable cycle in the black community” (Heinze 141).

One of the most important characters who represents this conflict of emotions is Cholly. As the archetypal male figure within the novel, Cholly can be seen as an extreme version of all other adults within the community. Cholly’s scapegoating behavior began at an early age, when he learns to misplace his hatred of the white men who forcibly emasculated him in front of his first lover onto his lover, despite the fact that she was equally as traumatized by their experience. However, in the same passage in which Cholly’s narrator describes this hatred, Cholly is also represented as feeling helpless because this girl represents “the one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight. The hee-hee-hee’s” (Morrison 151). Through this passage, Cholly’s behavior towards his family can be understood a deeper level, though perhaps not condoned. Just like the rest of the characters in the novel, Cholly is only seeking self-preservation. His own life is an example of what Furman

labels the “process by which self-hatred becomes scapegoating”, and consequently his treatment of Pecola can be seen as “a bold symbol of his own despair and frustrations” (Furman 15). Because he is unable to protect the ones he loves, Cholly takes control of their lives in the only way he can: through abuse. Though it may seem contradictory, ensuring their misery is a way for him to take control over the fate of his family.

Cholly’s life experiences have created within him a nearly immobilizing hatred of white men and the white community in general. Yet even he if wanted to direct his anger towards the source of his pain, he is unable to do so because “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” (Morrison 150-151). Cholly, who is “humiliated by economic powerlessness” takes out his innermost feelings of failure on his family and specifically Pecola because it is the only way he can prevent these feelings of failure from being directed towards himself: Cholly’s character “fights whom he can and not whom he should” (Furman 17). Because of his inability to direct his hatred toward its source and his use of his family as a scapegoat for his own feelings of guilt and inadequacy, Cholly is representative of all the adults within the novel, and indeed within the black community. As Madhu Dubey points out in his book *Black Women Novelists and the National Aesthetic*, Cholly and his family are almost a perfect caricature of the stereotypical black family: they are economically disadvantaged, marginalized from society (or outdoors of society), and their familial relations also fit perfectly into the stereotype of a dysfunctional black family (Dubey 33). Dubey points out that “Cholly is an unemployed alcoholic, while his wife Pauline works as a domestic servant to provide for her family” (Dubey 33). This

coupled with Cholly's "failure to assume any kind of familial responsibility" rounds out the stereotypical nature of the Breedlove family (Dubey 33).

In case the connection was not clear enough between Cholly's misplaced violence towards those he loves and the black community's treatment of their own children and each other, Cholly is modeled after the stereotypical black male. He is not just Cholly, but he is every black man who has ever been placed outdoors by society. While Cholly's behavior is more extreme, his actions are nonetheless representative of the ways in which adults within the community treat their own families (Bouson 25). Because of this, Cholly becomes a physical and tangible reminder of the black community's own failures and hypocrisies, and this is the cause of much of the black community's resentment of him. In other words, Cholly is a constant and concrete reminder that the black community is painfully and obviously outdoors from white society and take out their anger concerning their displacement on other, weaker members of their own community. The black community puts Cholly outdoors as a way to separate themselves, and consequently their actions, from him, and in doing so they are able to avoid the mirror that Cholly's character holds up for them. Cholly's misplaced hatred, violence, and aggression toward his family is a way to prevent his hatred of white society (and in many ways his self-hatred) from consuming and destroying him in the same way that the black community places Cholly outdoors in order for them to cling to the illusion that they are not like him in their treatment of their own families and each other (Bouson 25).

These characteristics make Cholly an example of the ways in which the adults within the black community take out their anger and frustrations on each other, and because of these characteristics he perpetually fills the role of the black community's

whipping boy. However, it is most often the children of the novel that find themselves feeling the brunt of this purgative abuse: Claudia and Frieda are screamed at and nearly beaten in their attempts to help Pecola when she begins menstruating for the first time; Mrs. MacTeer flies into a rage because Pecola drinks too much milk; even the springtime, a seasonal change that is supposed to be marked by joy as children are able to stay outside more and more and enjoy the warm weather is understood by Claudia and the other children to “[mean] only a change in whipping style” (Morrison 97). Claudia explains that “even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer” (Morrison 97).

Claudia explains the injustice of this cycle of abuse best when she explains that “when we trip and fall down they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration” (Morrison 10). The needless blame adults place on children and the verbal abuse their normal, youthful mistakes generate serve as an example of the needs of the black community, and specifically the adults within the community, to scapegoat their own anger and frustration. However, this blame also exemplifies the idea that the black community is partially responsible for keeping itself outdoors from the larger society.

There is certainly injustice in the way the children in the novel are treated, but more significant is the emotional damage that children undergo because of their treatment at the hands of the adults. At the start of the novel, Claudia is chastised by her mother as being “the biggest fool in this town” for getting sick and not having “sense enough to hold your head out of the bed” before vomiting (Morrison 10, 11; Matus 40). Claudia,

who has already described herself as feeling “full of guilt and self-pity” then explains that “my mother’s anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks and I am crying...I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness ‘take hold’” (Morrison 10, 11-12). This scene demonstrates that the adults within the community are not simply scapegoating their children, but also placing upon them the humiliation, frustration, and anger that has been placed on them by the white community. Bousoon refers to this cycle of humiliation as an “intergenerational transmission of shame”, which aptly explains the feelings of outdoorsness that parents pass down to their children through the parents’ victimization of their children (Bousoon 25). Consequently, in addition to the humiliation children feel at their exclusion from society, the adults within the black community instill within their children their own feelings that being outdoors from society generates.

The children feel the weight of their status as outdoors from society through the feelings of humiliation, frustration, and anger that their parents instill in them through their interactions with the children, but they also sense their status as outdoors from society through the pressure their parents place on them to conform to the impossible standards of white middle-class society. The importance placed on dolls is an example of this pressure as well as the idea that, from a very young age, children within the community understand subconsciously what is expected of them. These “blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned” dolls that “all the world had agreed...was what every child treasured” are, as previously discussed, quite obviously representative of the societal standard of beauty (Morrison 20). The dolls also serve as “the big, the special, the loving gift” that the parents within the black community offer to their children as rare proof of their fondness. Just as students and teachers indulge Maureen Peal over all others,

Pauline favors her white employer's child over her own, and Bojangles favors Shirley Temple over those within his own racial community, the dolls are another way in which children are reminded that the closer they are to whiteness and the white standard of beauty, the more acceptance and love they will find (Bouson 32). The children's parents encourage this idea by applauding those children who treat their dolls with care and respect, while chastising those who are unable to love the impersonal characteristics of the dolls (Bouson 32). Claudia, who contrary to other girls is "physically revolted by and secretly frightened" of the dolls, is not only not interested in the doll as a plaything, but also demonstrates rage at the object when she expresses the urge to "break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around" and "remove the cold and stupid eyeball" (Morrison 20, 21). Because of her treatment of the dolls, she is heavily rebuked by the adults in the community, who see her hatred towards the doll not as a sign of her own frustration at her exclusion from the white community, but as uncooperative ingratitude. The pressure parents place on their children within the community is demonstrated clearly in this situation as Claudia learns "what I was expected to do with the doll" to avoid being rebuffed by the adults around her (Morrison 20). However, even though she learns to "worship" figures of white beauty such as her doll and Shirley Temple, she never takes any enjoyment out of her relationship with them, "knowing, and even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement" (Morrison 23; Bouson 32).

It is then clear that the children within the black community are not born with this hatred of themselves and their image, but rather it is thrust upon them by *both* society and the adults within their own community. The adults' negative reactions to the children's

small forms of rebellion, such as destroying an obvious symbol of white beauty, is criticized and punished in such a way that the children quickly learn that to not idealize this image of beauty is to be excluded from society and also from their own community. In rejecting Shirley Temple, the dolls, and other representations of white beauty, the children understand that they will not belong with everyone else who is inherently worshipping this white culture. Claudia herself admits the futility of her doll's destruction, understanding that "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" (Morrison 74). In this way, while society bears most of the responsibility for the exclusion or outdoorsness, of the black community, the community itself also takes a role in teaching its children from a young age that the culture that excludes and represses them must at the same time be revered. This position forces children to grow up feeling frustration, anger, and humiliation at their own inadequacy in living up to the white middle-class values thrust upon them (Bousoon 30). Because of this, the cycle of the abused becoming the abuser is perpetuated.

The children within the novel are thus put into a unique position because, although they feel the same injustice at being excluded from society, they do not have the luxury to lash out at those lower in the hierarchal order than they in order to exorcise these feelings. Because of this, the children within the black community often turn on each other and their purgative abuse takes on the form of bullying. Interestingly enough, the children often use each others' blackness as a way to insult one another, showing that they already understand that to be black is to be ugly, bad, or otherwise wrong. For

example, Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola's friendship with the light-skinned Maureen Peal is short lived after Maureen, who is herself black, exclaims, "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly and black e mos" (Morrison 73). This insult demonstrates that being called black, or rather being reminded of one's own blackness, is the ultimate low-blow. In fact, although Maureen and the other girls exchange multiple insults within this scene, it is this particular one that reduces their interaction to a physical fight. From this interaction it is clear that to be less black is also to be less ugly, less disadvantaged, less marginalized. In short, to be lighter than the rest of the black community is to be less outdoors (Bouson 32). It is consequently both society *and* the black community in conjunction that use the black community's skin color as a justification for their mistreatment of one another.

This is very much the case for Pecola, whose family is already the community's favorite scapegoat for their own feelings of inadequacy at meeting the standard of whiteness (Bouson 25). In one of the most poignant and revealing scenes of the novel, Pecola finds herself being harassed by a gang of boys who make up a chant calling Pecola "black e mo" (Morrison 65). Although the narrative voice of the scene is supposed to be that of a young Claudia, there is a kind of retrospect and wisdom reminiscent of the adult Claudia narrator when Claudia states simply that the boys' insults were formed from "their contempt for their own blackness" (Morrison 65). Through their "exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness", these boys and their treatment of the most disadvantaged member of their own community represent not only the children of the black community and their scapegoating of each other, but also the black community as a whole and the scapegoating of itself (Morrison 65; Bouson 25).

These boys, who have already begun to feel the injustice and humiliation of being black in a white world, have chosen a member of not only their own community, but of their own peer group to place outdoors, because through “[dancing] a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit”, these boys, and thus the black community, are able to maintain their own dignity and sanity. Otherwise, living in a society where they are powerless and dependent on their oppressors would result in the “fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds...and spilled over lips of outrage” being turned inwardly onto themselves. Through this lens, Pecola’s bullying can be understood as a form of self-preservation for these boys in the same way that the adults’ bullying of the children is a form of self-preservation (Matus 44). To survive in a world in which they are perpetually humiliated, looked down upon, and otherwise mistreated, it is crucial for members of the black community to learn from a young age how to prevent their hatred from becoming reflective.

### CHAPTER THREE: PECOLA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Part of the reason the relationships between the members of the black community within *The Bluest Eye* are especially interesting is that the individuals within the community are often responsible for their own oppression, often recreating the feelings of humiliation, anger, and frustration that they themselves feel at their exclusion from society as a whole. Similarly, Pecola's relationship to the black community offers a very unique and fascinating insight into the subconscious of the black community and also into Pecola herself. Through analyzing the ways in which the black community places Pecola outdoors, as well as their motivations for doing so, it is possible to come to an even better conclusion about the complexity of the black community's subconscious. Even more interesting, however, are the ways in which Pecola excludes *herself*, putting herself outdoors from the black community in an attempt to survive as a black girl within a white world.

Pecola, like every character within the novel, is of course outdoors from society as a whole. However, she is one of the few characters that is outdoors from the black community as well. Like Cholly, Pecola is placed outdoors from the community because she serves as a painful reminder of the black community's inadequacies. However, while Cholly is excluded from the black community because he reminds the community of the hypocrisy in the way they treat each other, Pecola is excluded because she is a physical reminder of the black community's helplessness at their location within society. In her book *Toni Morrison*, Jill Matus states that "Pecola reminds these others of their own

vulnerabilities and the perilous weakness of their defenses” (Matus 43). Pecola represents this helplessness in that she is the ultimate victim (Bouson 25). Bouson explains that Pecola is “a victim not only of racial shaming but also of her crippled and crippling family” and consequently has no one to really turn to (Bouson 25). As the young, black daughter of an unemployed and abusive father and an unloving mother, she is economically, socially, and racially disadvantaged. In addition, her age and gender also make her particularly vulnerable to the abuse of society, as she is located at the very bottom of the societal and communal hierarchy. All these factors are made even more dangerous by the fact that Pecola has no one within her life to turn to: she is abused by her father due to his lack of interest, rejected by her mother because of her perceived ugliness, bullied and teased by classmates, and ignored by her teachers (Bouson 25).

However, Pecola’s helplessness extends beyond the fact that she lacks a family or other supportive group to advocate for her. Her true helplessness lies in her inability to fight back against those who abuse or mistreat her. Claudia explains that she “wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, for her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets” (Morrison 73-74). Whether it is because Pecola lacks the support system that the other members of the black community enjoy or because she “[accepts]...without question” the “cloak of ugliness” that society and the community places on her and her family, Pecola never questions or fights her fate (Morrison 38). Because she believes herself deserving of the treatment she receives, she is unable to fight back against her oppressors.

It is partially this vulnerability and helplessness that makes Pecola so attractive to the community as a victim. Just like in other instances of bullying and abuse within the

novel, teachers, adults, and children alike pick on Pecola in order to transfer their own collective feelings of self-loathing onto another member of the community weaker than they (Bouson 25). However, Pecola's location as outdoors from the community serves the additional purpose of allowing those around her to separate themselves from her, and thus from her helplessness. The black community is constantly faced with reminders of their exclusion from society through the media, its interactions with the white community, and its own internal interactions. These aspects of society remind the black community every day not only of their location as outdoors of society, but also that no matter how hard the community tries to conform to the white ideal, they will never live up to the white ideal and will never find acceptance within white culture. In other words, the black community is helpless to change their location within society because they are helpless to change their racial background. While on a deeper level everything from movies to television to baby dolls to Shirley Temple reminds the black community of this helplessness, it is impossible for the black community to separate themselves from these reminders. It is easier to cope with the abstract idea that society has put the community in a helpless position where the individuals within the community are both oppressed by society and yet also need and desire to belong to it. However, Pecola is a physical, concrete reminder of the helplessness experienced by every member of the black community; she becomes, as Bouson puts it, "the ultimate carrier of her family's -- and her African-American community's-- shame" (Bouson 25). The parents, teachers, and children that make up the black community bear witness every day to Pecola's abuse at the hands of her family and each other as well as to her reaction to this abuse. Other children fight back against bullies, exchange insults with those who would taunt them, or at the very least harbor

some kind of ill will towards their abusers. For example, Claudia and Frieda not only chase the gang of boys that teases Pecola outside of their school, but also are the ones who exchange insults with Maureen Peal, calling her “dog tooth”, “boy-crazy”, and even trying to beat her up (Morrison 71-72). However, Pecola lacks this same fire, this same resentment that is so crucial to survival within the black community and society as a whole. Her helplessness is recognized as her biggest weakness, and the rest of the black community treats this weakness as if it were contagious. Just like Claudia understands that her mother “despises [her] weakness at letting the sickness ‘take hold’”, the black community despises Pecola for her helpless behavior and see her helplessness not as a character trait, but as a kind of disease that she has allowed to take hold of her (Morrison 11-12). Because the community sees this helplessness as an almost self-indulgent weakness, it is not enough for them to simply ignore her or isolate her. They must also abuse her themselves to prove their own distance from her. Maureen Peal and the gang of boys insult Claudia and Frieda and Pecola, respectively, by calling them “black and ugly” (Morrison 73) despite the fact that they themselves are also black, just as the black community abuses Pecola for a helplessness that they fall victim to each and every day.

It is certainly true that not every interaction Pecola has within the novel is negative: she has the childhood honor of being the first to undergo puberty; she spends time with Claudia and Frieda, who often stick up for her and defend her against bullying; she is for a short time adopted as a kind of pet to Maureen Peal. These situations all have something in common, however: each one involves Pecola being taken care of or protected in some way. When Pecola begins menstruating for the first time, Claudia and Frieda attempt to help her without alerting the adults, who they think will only be mad at

them. Claudia and Frieda similarly come to Pecola's aid when she is bullied by the gang of boys, and Maureen Peal only offers to buy Pecola ice cream because she has joined Claudia and Frieda's bandwagon of protection. Although these situations are examples of positive interactions with Pecola, they are only allowed or considered socially acceptable because the other characters present are still interacting with Pecola from a position of power: they are choosing to give her their help, and in this way they are not associating with her as an equal, who would be at risk of contracting her helplessness, but as a superior.

It is easy to write off Pecola's exclusion from the community as solely a product of the black community's desire to separate itself from her helplessness. However, what makes Pecola's case so interesting and gives *The Bluest Eye* yet another layer of depth and complexity is that as much as the community excludes her and puts her outdoors, she excludes and puts *herself* outdoors. Pecola is naturally shy and withdrawn, but unlike many children who are bullied or find themselves isolated in some other way, Pecola does not display the usual excitement and joy at finding inclusion (Bouson 29). Though she is befriended by Claudia and Frieda, she does not make much of an effort to interact pleasantly with them. In her interactions with the two sisters, she rarely offers her own opinion or contributes to the conversation in anyway other than to ask the occasional question or to offer up a noncommittal "I don't care" (Morrison 19). Similarly, when the most popular girl in school and perhaps in the community, Maureen Peal, takes Pecola under her wing, she shows very little excitement, although accepts the ice cream Maureen offers her. Although very little of the novel is from Pecola's perspective, she seems to have no problem being ignored by the rest of the community and left to her own devices

(Samuels et. al. 15). Pecola's very body language represents the "defensive withdrawing and hiding behavior characteristic of shame-vulnerable individuals" as she is constantly has her eyes averted or cast down, slumped shoulders, and a drooping head (Bouson 29).

It could be argued that the reason Pecola is content with the black community's exclusion of her is because she sees it as a mark of whiteness: white society puts the black community outdoors, therefore by keeping herself outdoors of the black community, Pecola links herself to white society. While there is certainly evidence to support this claim, a stronger case can be made for the fact that Pecola's method of coping as a black girl living in a white world depends on her segregation from the rest of society and the black community. Unlike the other characters in the novel who are able to exorcise their negative feelings concerning their outdoorsness from society onto other, weaker members of the community, Pecola never develops the strength to act upon the anger that is so purgative for the black community. She is, as previously mentioned, a "shame-vulnerable individual": marginalized in every possible way, she seemingly bears the weight of the entire black community's shame on her shoulders (Bouson 30).

Although the other characters' strategy of scapegoating their feelings onto others does indeed perpetuate the feelings of frustration, pain, inadequacy, and the sense of failure within the community, it also allows for the survival of the individual. If Pecola's helplessness is seen by the black community as weakness, the anger many individuals feel is conversely seen as strength, so long as this anger is turned outwards toward the community.

There is one moment in which it seems as though Pecola has finally learned the purgative abuse that is so critical to survival within the black community. After she has

left the candy store in which she has been humiliated by the shopkeeper, Pecola trips on a sidewalk crack and is suddenly filled with anger. She then comes to the realization that “anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger, a reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (Morrison 50). In this moment, Pecola seems to have discovered the merits of anger in her current social, economic, and racial setting: to be angry is to be dangerous; to be dangerous is to be strong; to be strong is to survive. The other black characters’ anger within the novel is a way for them to, as Matus puts it, “[produce] resistance to cultural valuations of blackness”, whereas “shame, which defines Pecola, ensures submission” (Matus 39). For a moment, it appears as though Pecola has finally developed the strength that anger can bring. However, this anger that “stirs and wakes in her” and “opens its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame” does not last, and Pecola is unable to sustain this brief feeling of power (Morrison 50). In the next moment “[the anger’s] thirst is too quickly quenched. It sleeps. The shame wells up again, its muddy rivulets seeping into her eyes” (Morrison 50). Instead of taking her anger and frustration and forcing it upon others, “she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes” (Morrison 74).

In contrast to the anger that is the mark of a black individual’s survival within a white world, Pecola’s method of coping is to simply pretend to disappear (Bouson 29). In fact, the only prayer Pecola offers to God, other than her prayer for blue eyes, is for God to “please make me disappear” (Morrison 45). Pecola’s vivid imagination does in fact allow her to slowly disappear as she focuses her attention on one body part at a time until all the “little parts of her body faded away” (Morrison 45). Not coincidentally, however, the only part of her body that Pecola is unable to wish away is her eyes. Her eyes, which

Pecola understands as being “everything” because “everything was there, in [her eyes]”, are the one physical part of herself that Pecola sees as obstructing her coping method because she physically cannot imagine them away. However, on a deeper level, Pecola’s eyes, the part of her body through which she sees the world, represent the ways in which society and the black community affect her ability to live in her own imaginary world. In Pecola’s perfect world, she has blue eyes and is by definition white and beautiful. The horrible events of her life are no longer an issue because she imagines that people think they “‘mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’” (Morrison 46; Samuels et. al. 11). However, this ideal world cannot exist when Pecola is constantly being confronted with reminders of her own inadequacy and failure to live up to the white ideal; in short, Pecola’s only method of coping fails when she is reminded that she does not have blue eyes and is confronted with a shame that “is a crippling emotion that leaves her merely humiliated, disempowered” (Matus 46).

One of the ways in which society distracts Pecola from her coping method can be seen in Pecola’s experience at the candy store. This scene, which is perhaps one of the first times Pecola is able to truly see herself through the eyes of white society, marks the beginning of Pecola’s awakening to her sense of self. Through her interactions with the storekeeper, Pecola is looking at herself through a kind of one-way mirror in which she can only see herself the way society sees her. When the store keeper looks at her and “somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, hover” and he “senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance” Pecola fully understands, perhaps for the first time, that white society does not even consider her a human being worthy of visual attention (Morrison 48; Heinze 26). In the most painful

and pivotal revelation of her entire life, Pecola understands that “the distaste must be for her, her blackness” (Morrison 49). The revelation that Pecola undergoes within the candy store results in a change of her entire world view: even the dandelions that she thought of as beautiful despite their label as weeds on her walk to the candy store are suddenly different to Pecola. “They *are* ugly,” she exclaims, “they *are* weeds” (Morrison 50).

The storekeeper’s interactions, or lack thereof, with Pecola are an example of both her racial awakening and the idea that society is constantly making the characters within the novel, including Pecola, painfully aware of their location as outside of the greater group. While for the other characters in the novel, this awareness stirs feelings of anger and frustration that can be displaced onto others, Pecola’s feelings at her exclusion from society make her simply wish to disappear. When she is unable to do so the anger, frustration, and feelings of inadequacy are turned onto herself, and she becomes consumed with a self-loathing and hatred that ultimately claims her sanity. She does not have the strength to survive in the community through anger and scapegoating, but she finds solace in a madness in which she “simply substitutes her inchoate reality with a better one: she has blue eyes which everyone admires and envies” (Furman 19).

In one of the final and most disturbing scenes of the entire novel, the reader is able to enter Pecola’s deranged mind and witness a conversation between Pecola and her imaginary friend. This descent into Pecola’s madness is significant not only in that it demonstrates the destructive power of such deep self-hatred within an individual, but also in that it shows why this delusion is necessary for Pecola’s survival. Within the scene, Pecola is the most social that she has been throughout the entire novel, and indeed it is one of the only times the reader is allowed any part of Pecola’s perspective. However,

Pecola's relationship with her imaginary friend is not purely positive; in fact it wavers between a relationship built on love and dedication and a relationship built on distrust and jealousy. At times Pecola informs her imaginary friend that she is "a real friend" and apologizes for "saying [she was] jealous and all", while at others she boasts about her eyes in front of her imaginary friend, claiming that her friend "[wishes she] had them" (Morrison 194, 196). Her confliction concerning her relationship to her imaginary friend is significant in that Pecola's imaginary friend is the one who is the most real representation of the real-life Pecola (Matus 48). While the Pecola within the fantasy world claims she can look at the sun for as long as she wants without feeling pain, her imaginary friend tells her that "*the sun is too bright. It hurts my eyes...You make me feel funny, staring at the sun like that*" (Morrison 195). Her imaginary friend is also the one who brings up the idea that the blue eyes may not last forever, as well as the concept that someone may have bluer eyes than Pecola. Because of these characteristics, the imaginary friend is representative of a saner Pecola who still suffers from the fears and insecurities of being black in a white culture. However, while Pecola was unable to conquer these fears and insecurities when she was sane enough to process the world around her, Pecola's madness has allowed her to overcome them. Her madness has given her what her family, Claudia and Frieda, and the black community could not: self-assurance and confidence in her own beauty. Although the beauty within Pecola's fantasy world is white beauty, and not her natural black beauty, Pecola has finally found a way to cope with her placement as outdoors from the society that she desperately craved approval from. Because, as Matus points out, "Pecola's [story] remains a story incapable of transmission", she "cannot tell it in the 'real' world" (Matus 49). The only way for the

reader to gain some kind of inside knowledge of what really happened to Pecola is through her imaginary friend, without whom “there is...no reclamation of the past in a way that allows Pecola to assimilate and process what has happened to her” (Matus 48). Just like the white ideal perpetuated by society is a fence that ensures the black community’s outdoorsness from society, Pecola’s madness is a kind of barbed wire fence that maintains and solidifies her location as outdoors from society as a way for her to deal with the traumatic events and the overwhelming shame that has come to dominate her life. It makes perfect sense then that Pecola’s story concludes with another example of the circular contradictions that abound throughout *The Bluest Eye*: it is only through removing herself even further from society that Pecola is able to cope with her initial displacement from the culture in which she lives.

## CONCLUSION

Through analyzing the relationships of each of the three entities within the novel (society as a whole, the black community, and Pecola), it is clear that the ways in which each are excluded and from what specifically they are excluded from is a complex and intricate issue. The relationships between each of these three entities are at the core of the novel because they speak to the most instinctual and critical emotional need: the need to belong. Perhaps the true question of the novel is not how and why the black community and Pecola are placed outdoors, but rather how do the characters and real people cope with being outdoors?

Morrison began writing her novel in the 1960's at a time when the Civil Rights Movement had brought race relations to the forefront of American politics and society. Race relations at this time were hotly debated and racism was much more visible and socially acceptable, both at the time of Morrison's writing as well as during the time period in which the novel takes place. However, has much really changed in modern day society? At an age when newspaper headlines are littered with stories of young black men being racially profiled and victimized by the police and discrimination against immigrants runs rampant, is society any closer to social and racial equality? And just as significantly, are the members of society still responsible for perpetuating the white ideal? Essentially, is the old adage that "white is right" still subconsciously understood to be true?

Ever since it has been possible for black writers to have a literary voice, black literature and especially black American literature has struggled with how to cope with racial and social inequality and has also attempted to answer the question of how to deal with one's racial identity. Frederick Douglass advocates fighting against white culture within society in a feisty, Claudia-esque way in his autobiography *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. In contrast, James Weldon Johnson seems to advocate passing as white when possible, or else fleeing the country in his book *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. The idea of fleeing the society that oppresses the black community is one echoed by Nella Larsen in her book *Quicksand* and also by Harriet Jacobs in her work *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. While certainly race relations in the times in which these books were written were much more violent and extreme, the question these works raise still lingers: is leaving the society that oppresses them the only option for black people living in a white society?

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison paints a very bleak picture of what will happen if black people chose to live in this oppressive white society. Morrison's narrative seems to suggest that a black person living in such a society only has two options for survival: she can either be consumed by anger in such a way that she is forced to take it out on loved ones or other members of her own community; or her shame and self-hatred can so fully absorb her that they drive her to madness. These two equally bleak options beg the question, is the battle for racial equality one with a painful and limited dead end?

Claudia's character is perhaps the only solution that is offered to the question or problem Morrison raises. If Cholly represents one end of the spectrum through his purgative abuse and Pecola represents the other through her madness, Claudia occupies a

kind of middle ground. To begin with, despite the fact that Claudia battles with her self image she is much more comfortable with her blackness, her “funkiness”, than anyone else in the novel (Morrison 83). Essentially, Claudia does not accept the “cloak of ugliness” society would have her wear, but rather fights the white ideal through her small acts and thoughts of rebellion (Morrison 38).

In addition, Claudia at times experiences the self-preserving anger that prevents her from being consumed by self-hatred. However, Claudia more so than any other character in the novel also manages to direct her anger onto people and objects that are closer to the true source of her pain. She expresses a hatred of Shirley Temple and other representations of the white ideal, and even explains her violent desires to destroy and hurt baby dolls and little white girls. This violence and anger by no means makes her a perfect character nor is it encouraged wholeheartedly by Morrison. However, she very rarely indulges in the bullying and scapegoating to exorcise her pain and anger. Perhaps most importantly, Claudia is also capable of contrition and her mature self is able to reflect back upon her childhood and recognize the role that she as a member of the black community played in Pecola’s victimization: “All of us-- all who knew her-- felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her...we were not strong, only aggressive...We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late.” (Morrison 205). Claudia is perhaps the only character able to weigh both the merits and consequences of anger.

It is no coincidence that Claudia, who is arguably the most emotionally healthy character within the novel, is also the least marginalized. Although she is certainly outdoors from society due to her race, she is also a member of a supportive and protective family: her father evicts Mr. Henry after he molests Frieda; her mother’s soothing hands

console her when she is sick despite her mother's initial annoyance and anger; and Frieda offers Claudia constant and loyal companionship as both a sister and a playmate. Unlike Pecola and Cholly, Claudia is inside. She belongs to both the community and her family.

In a beautifully circular way, the novel ultimately relates back to Claudia's initial explanation of societal location: "there is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*...like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead" (Morrison 17-18). To be outdoors is to be dead, emotionally and mentally. And as Claudia demonstrates, the only thing that makes being outdoors from *anywhere* bearable or survivable, is to be indoors *somewhere*.

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