

FAMILY COMPLEXITY IN TONI MORRISON'S THE BLUEST EYE

A COMPLEXIDADE DA FAMÍLIA EM *O OLHO MAIS AZUL*, DE TONI MORRISON

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ABSTRACT: The present article discusses the complexity of family bonds in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Revisiting the concepts of family, motherhood and fatherhood through the contribution of Collins (1992); Laqueur (1992); Chodorov & Contratto (1992), the article explores how family relationships are established and affected by society. Analyzing the MacTeer and the Breedlove's family members, the article explains how oppression suffered by black people influences their family relationships.

Keywords: African-American Literature; motherhood; fatherhood.

RESUMO: O presente artigo discute a complexidade dos laços familiares em *O olho mais azul*, de Toni Morrison (1970). Revisitando os conceitos de família, maternidade e paternidade através das contribuições de Collins (1992); Laqueur (1992); Chodorov & Contratto (1992), são exploradas as relações familiares e o quanto a sociedade as influencia. Analisando os membros das famílias MacTeer e Breedlove, o artigo explica como a opressão sofrida pelos negros afeta suas relações familiares.

Palavras-chave: Literatura Afro-americana; maternidade; paternidade.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE BLUEST EYE AS A POLYPHONIC NOVEL

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* portrays stories of people who live in a black community in Lorain, Ohio, during the 1940s. Depicting mainly black children's experiences, Morrison explores race, gender and class issues throughout the novel. Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old girl, is considered ugly by everyone around her.

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Her supposed ugliness affects her in an intense way: she wants to change her features (black eyes to blue eyes, for instance) in order to be beautiful, and consequently, loved and perceived by others. During a period right after her father burned down their house, Pecola, whose family is falling apart, finds shelter in MacTeer's home. There, she becomes a friend of the MacTeer girls: Frieda and Claudia. Having these two girls as friends makes Pecola happier and aware of her possibilities. After Pecola comes back home, on the contrary, she sees herself in a hopeless situation. Differently from the MacTeer's family, Pecola's does not provide for her. The Breedloves – father (Cholly), mother (Pauline) and brother (Sammy) – seem almost indifferent towards the girl; there is a lack of connection among all the family members. Many episodes in which Pecola is physically and psychologically abused lead her to madness, being the most remarkable one the moment when she is raped by her father and, as a consequence, impregnates. The story is told in a nonlinear way both by adult Claudia, who lived her childhood period in the community and now looks back at the past in order to understand some events in a clearer way, and by an omniscient third-person narrator. Although this feature might confuse the reader in a first reading, this narrative resource allows one to have a double, and therefore more complete perception of the story.

Carl Malmgren calls attention to the narrative switches in the novel. The story is divided into seasons that are “in the first person”, but are also “double-voiced” because they emphasize the “difference between the experience ‘I’ and the narrating ‘I’” (MALMGREN, 2000, p. 252). Through this resource, the reader can perceive the contrast between Claudia's infant perception of the happenings and her present point of view. Narrator Claudia distances herself to tell the story which occurred some years earlier. By doing so, she is able to see things from an outside perspective and then try to understand “how” things happened, “since why is difficult to handle” (MORRISON, 2007, p. 6). Also, the polyphonic aspect of the novel is constituted through the

omniscient third-person narrator. For example, the sections that present the stories of Pauline, Cholly and Soaphead Church not only expose their consciousness, but also focus on how these individuals are socially inserted. Hence, they are part of a whole, where things are interdependent and influence each other. As pointed out by Malmgren, Tony Morrison's text displays multiple narratives that depict a community.

Another interesting example of this multiplicity is the stories of the three prostitutes: Poland, China and Maginot Line, who are Pecola's neighbors. Not only they are part of this multifocal narrative, but they also represent the complex political conflict of World War II as well. As Jane Kuenz mentions in the excerpt below:

With these characters, Morrison literalizes the novel's overall conflation of black female bodies as the sites of fascist invasions of one kind or another, as the terrain on which is mapped the encroachment and colonization of African-American experiences, particularly those of its women, by a seemingly hegemonic white culture. The *Bluest Eye* as a whole documents this invasion and its concomitant erasure of specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions in terms of sexuality as it intersects with commodity culture. (KUENZ, 1993 p. 421).

As highlighted by Kuenz (1993), Morrison condemns this issue throughout the novel. Through her attempt to "rewrite the specific bodies and histories of the black Americans" (p. 421) with the creation of the three prostitutes, she expects to show a positive aspect of the story. These three characters are not the product of an idealized life or a dream. There are no romantic sad stories behind them. Nor they are crying over their fates. They see themselves in a very realistic way. They know their capacities and their place in society and they are comfortable with who they are:

They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their "understanding." Nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate an outward brittleness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things, and could make the right man happy.

Neither were they the sloppy, inadequate whores who, unable to make a living at it alone, turn to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction, avoiding suicide only to punish the memory of some absent father or to sustain the misery of some silent mother. (MORRISON, 2007, p. 55-56).

In the passage above, Morrison makes it clear that these women break with the classical stereotype of the ideal prostitute, such as the one presented in Alexandre Dumas' *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848 [2014]), where the woman is idealized and romanticized. Poland, China and The Maginot Line are presented as regular human beings. Their stories contribute to the polyphony of the novel. Moreover, they "represent black female subjectivity as a layered, shifting, and complex reality" (KUENZ, 1993, p. 421).

2. FAMILY IN *THE BLUEST EYE*: FROM IDEALIZATION TO REALITY

The complexity of familiar bounds may be considered one of the main themes in *The Bluest Eye*. The novel starts directly mentioning Dick and Jane, acknowledged characters from basal reader books written by William S. Gray and Zerna Sharp. Dick and Jane's books were famous resources to teach children to read from the 1930's to the 1970's all over the United States. The problem about using Dick and Jane's reading collections was the lack of representation (misrepresentation, in some cases) of American diversity. Besides being white, the characters symbolize an idealized concept of family and childhood. Consequently, it affected people who did not fit in that pattern of family. Dick and Jane's family "stands as the only visible model for happiness and thus implicitly accuses those whose lives do not match up" (KUENZ, 1993, p. 422). As Debra Werrlein points out "primers before 1965 deport color, gender, and poverty to "other lands," implicitly defining such variations as culturally

un-American or politically irrelevant” (WERRLEIN, 2005, p. 58). The white beauty pattern is well illustrated in the image below:

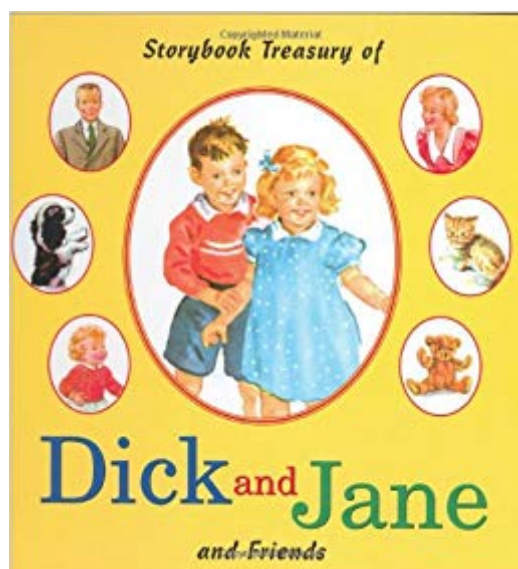


IMAGE 1²

Moreover, beyond the white pattern of beauty, there is also some model of child behavior being imposed. “Since Jane never complains about her forced domesticity or her subordination to Dick, she lets the privileges of Dick's innocent world stand for the experience of all American childhoods” (WERRLEIN, 2005, p. 58). Although Dick and Jane had been treated as childhood representatives in the beginning of the twentieth century, there is no possibility that only two characters represent all American children's experiences in an effective way. The United States of America is a vast country, full of plurality and multiple identities. Two white children are incapable of representing such diversity by themselves.

Contrasting the idea of family presented through Dick and Jane, there are two other important families in the novel: the Breedloves and the MacTeers. Each of these families is constituted by four people: mother and father and two children. Both

² Source: Amazon Storybook, 2017.

families live in Lorain, Ohio, and belong to the same black community. Similarities and differences between the Breedloves and the MacTeers will be analyzed before contrasting them both with Dick and Jane's imposed family model. This analysis will be divided in the following sections: fatherhood, motherhood and childhood (daughters).

3. FATHERHOOD

Thomas Laqueur (1992) expresses his dissatisfaction with the lack of studies about the theme of fatherhood. He states that because of patriarchy imposed functions, people have conformed to adopt "the perspective of nineteenth-century" in which "men belong to the public sphere of the marketplace and women to the private sphere of the family" (LAQUEUR, 1992, p. 155). In many occasions, fathers are the head of the family, a respectable figure or a leader. They usually assume an important role, but are not emotionally connected with their children. In novels written by women who belong to minority groups, it is very common to see fathers playing a supporting role, sometimes they are barely mentioned and disappear from the story. One memorable case in which this happens is Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* ([1984], 2009) narrated in first-person by Esperanza, also a girl who is as old as Pecola. Although she portrays her whole neighborhood, especially the women, she never gives many details about her father during the story. Overall, men seem to be losing their role in current modern families.

The MacTeer's father is a parent worried about the welfare of his children. Although his presence is not highlighted throughout the story, he always provides for Frieda and Claudia. Mr. MacTeer hits Mr. Henry when he tries to abuse Frieda. He is a protecting father who is always there for his children. Compared to Mr. MacTeer, Cholly Breedlove has an opposite personality. Disappointed with his own life, Cholly

turns into an alcoholic. As remarked by Werrlein (2005, p. 159) “Cholly endures a life marked by powerlessness from his birth”. The son of a single mother, Cholly was abandoned as a baby and raised by his aunt. After his aunt dies, he had no one else to count on. In his attempt to create a bond with his father (who never knew about his existence), he was rejected over a crap game³. Furthermore, when he was starting his sexual life, he suffered a humiliating episode, in which he was oppressed by white men. According to Werrlein, Cholly has a constant feeling of powerlessness, which is fed when he “accepts a new couch that arrives broken in half” and emphasized by the “working poverty cycle” (p. 159) in which he is stuck. Moreover, he does not have a model of father in which to be inspired. This affects him deeply not only as a parent, son or man, but also as a subject and a human being. “Through Cholly's inability to express love constructively, Morrison paints a picture of black fatherhood so incapacitated that it sacrifices its children to save itself.” (p. 61). Everything that society had given him was oppression. Then, it is natural that he becomes an oppressor. Thus, he is stuck in another cycle: the abandoned child now turns into the father that abandons.

4. MOTHERHOOD

Present in a huge amount of feminist debates, the motherhood issue is a very complex one. Nancy Chodorov and Susan Contratto (1992) discuss the conflicting faces of motherhood. At the same time that motherhood is perceived as a gift by many women; it is also felt as a burden by others. An agreeable fact is that there is an idealization of the perfect mother, who would be “an all-powerful mother [...] totally responsible for how their children turn out, [and] is blamed for everything from her daughter's limitations to the crisis of human existence” (CHODOROV; CONTRATTO,

³ *Crap game*, or *craps*, is a popular game in North American ghettos.

1992, p. 192). Moreover, the authors highlight the difficulty for sexuality and motherhood to coexist. According to the authors, many women, when becoming mothers, end up erasing their sexuality, completely or just for a while. What may come next, as a result of frustration, is the denial of their daughters' sexuality. Therefore, especially after post-Freudian theories, a very relevant role is destined to mothers, as they are blamed "for any failings in their children" (p. 202). In a way, it is easy to blame Pauline for Pecola's downfall. Mothers are supposed to provide for their children and always be there when they need them. However, if one takes this side of reading the story, one is falling to the stereotypical idealization of the mother's role.

At the same time, black feminist theory debates motherhood through different perspectives. As pointed out by Patricia Collins (1992), there is an intense idealization of the black mother as a strong woman, capable of swallowing her suffering and moving on. Facing the lack of opportunities, black mothers are known for making a way out of nothing. While white mothers have the work-not-to-work debate, black mothers simply will work if they can, because they need to provide for their children. As mentioned by Collins (1992, p. 218), "the institution of Black motherhood is both dynamic and dialectical [and] consists of a series of constantly renegotiated relationships". In other words, not only the biological mother of the child will assume her role, but also, aunts, grandmothers and neighbors might play the mother role, if necessary. They will be called "othermothers" (p. 219). Besides, motherhood can also "serve as a site where black women express and learn the power of self-definition, the importance of valuing and respecting ourselves, the necessity of self-reliance and a belief in black women's empowerment" (p. 218). Collins acknowledges that motherhood can be a "burdensome condition that stifles [women's] creativity, exploits their labor and make them partners on their own oppression" (p. 218) on the other side.

Thinking of Mrs. MacTeer as a mother, it is possible to state that she fits Collins' concept of the strong, admirable black mother, who provides for her children. Despite being strict with her daughters, she is also attentive and takes care of them when they are sick. Moreover, she is also an "othermother" for Pecola, during a short period of time. Even though Mrs. MacTeer's family does not fit the white standard of family (because: first, her family is black; second, they do not live in the suburbs; and last, they are not part of Dick and Jane's high society) it can be considered functional. Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer play the role of father and mother and are able to fulfill their children's basic needs.

Throughout the novel, Pauline seems very disenchanted with motherhood. The ninth of eleven children, during her teens, she takes care of her younger brothers and develops an ability for organizing and arranging things. She abandons school and ends up happily in charge of the housework. After she meets Cholly, they fall in love with each other, marry and subsequently move to Ohio. There, she loses her front tooth and starts feeling displaced: "Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair" (MORRISON, 2007, p. 118). She had difficulties in connecting with other women, even if they were black. Her self-esteem starts to decrease and she tries unsuccessfully to assimilate into other women: "the women in the town wore high-heeled shoes, and when Pauline tried to wear them, they aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp" (p. 117-118). Her only comfort is to watch Hollywood movies, in which she learns about beauty patterns, and also that she does not fit them. In order to fit Hollywoodian beauty standards, Pauline starts working to afford clothes and makeup. However, as the following passage illustrates, this is not a natural process: "The sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way" (p. 118). The concept of beauty is something she did not use to think about before moving to Ohio. In Kentucky and Alabama, she lived

happier, free from the oppressive white pattern of beauty. In the following passage, the narrator warns about the danger of buying the idea of beauty:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another — physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. (MORRISON, 2007, p. 122).

After being influenced by this standard of beauty, Pauline changes the way she perceives people and her judgment towards others as “she was 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 the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen”. (MORRISON, 2007 p. 122). It is interesting to see that a common activity, such as watching movies, which might seem just a hobby, has actually a much more complex impact in one’s life, since it taught Pauline “all there was to love and all there was to hate” (MORRISON, 2007 p. 122).

Firstly, disconnected from the women around her, Pauline starts losing her bond with her husband, Cholly, who once was so lively. They start fighting frequently and, as a consequence, her feelings of loneliness and displacement intensify. These fights and emotions slightly attenuate when she gets pregnant for the first time, as “they eased back into a relationship more like the early days of their marriage, when he asked if she were tired or wanted him to bring her something from the store” (MORRISON, 2007 p. 121). After bearing two children who do not fit the beauty standard she sought, Pauline seems to have accepted and understood her reality. As the narrator reveals: “She was older now, with no time for dreams and movies. It was time to put all of the pieces together, make coherence where before there had been none” (p. 127). Thus, Pauline becomes hardened. She focuses her attention on work, where she can fulfill her need for a beautiful family:

It was her good fortune to find a permanent job in the home of a well-to-do family whose members were affectionate, appreciative, and generous. She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. [...] She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs. [...] Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house. The things she could afford to buy did not last, had no beauty or style, and were absorbed by the dingy storefront. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man — they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely. Here she could arrange things, clean things, line things up in neat rows. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise [...] They even gave her what she had never had — a nickname — Polly. It was her pleasure to stand in her kitchen at the end of a day and survey her handiwork. [...] Hearing, “We’ll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant.” (MORRISON, 2007 p. 127-128).

The detailed description of her job, in the extract above, shows how her old projection of motherhood and housewife are accomplished somehow. She unfolds herself and performs the mothering task at a white home in the suburbs, where she not only receives another name, but also acknowledgment and affection because of her deeds. Thus, Pauline keeps “this order, this beauty, for herself”, this “private world” which she “never introduced (...) into her storefront, or to her children” (MORRISON, 2007, p. 128). Being fulfilled with her job, Pauline does not feel the need to establish bonds with her children. As remarked by Werrlein (2005, p. 61), “Pauline feels no patriotic obligation to nurture the offspring that, to her, reflects her own ugliness. Instead, having learned that a white family's servant wields far more power than a black family's mother”.

Finally, Pauline may provide food and a house for her children. Nevertheless, she does not fulfill their need of being mothered. As Cholly, it is difficult for Pauline to overcome oppression and give love to those of her own. The Breedloves “who emerge from histories of oppression might reproduce that degradation within the family unit”

(WERRLEIN, 2005, p. 61). Pauline speaks softly to the Fisher's little white girl, while she is harsh with Pecola. Consequently, Pecola feels unloved by her own family and displaced in society. The same displacement Pauline feels is now projected on her daughter. Feeling the need to be cared of, Pecola tries to search an "othermother" around her neighborhood. One example is her attempt to establish bonds with the prostitutes who live near her house, especially with The Maginot Line. Pecola enjoys visiting these women because, when they interact, even though shyly, she has the opportunity to learn something from their stories. As a result, Pecola looks all around for the love and affection that she does not receive neither from her family, nor from most part of her community.

5. FINAL THOUGHTS: ON DAUGHTERS

Having revisited some of the main aspects of the *The Bluest Eye* and having discussed how parental bonds are portrayed in the novel, the next step is to provide a brief reflection about the daughters in the novel. Since in Morrison's story most child characters are girls, this article does not examine children as a whole, but only a group in a very specific context: (black) girls as daughters. In the previous section, the term "daughter" was already mentioned in opposition to "mothers", in order to explain the complexity of their relationship. Concerning daughters, Collins (1992) mentions that "mothers may have ensured their daughters' physical survival, but at the high cost of their emotional destruction" and that the ones "with strong self-definitions and self-valuations who offer serious challenges to oppressive situations may not physically survive" (COLLINS, 1992, p. 224).

In *The Bluest Eye*, what happens is actually, the opposite: Claudia, the girl who (mentally) questions beauty standards and people's reasons to admire Shirley Temple, and hence is closer to these "strong self-definitions", is the one who survives; while

Pecola, the most vulnerable and oppressed girl, is the one who ends up smashed by society and might not physically and mentally survive. Through this ending, Morrison conveys a powerful message, motivating black girls to question standards and embrace their own identities. Besides, the author is warning women about the dangers of trying to fit exclusive standards and to assimilate into a culture that is not theirs.

Werrlein (2005) acknowledged Morrison's construction of children in the novel. On the one hand, the loss of innocence is, inevitably, one issue present in *The Bluest Eye*. On the other hand, Morrison allows "her child-characters [to] speak while critically invoking their socio-economic contexts. Instead of blaming the children for their own suffering, she blames their families, their community, and, ultimately, their nation" (WERRLEIN, 2005, p. 55). Morrison's child-characters go through the process of becoming aware of the whole system of oppression and some of them start criticizing, even though sometimes only mentally, its maintenance. Claudia, for instance, breaks with the system by embracing blackness. She rejects white dolls and praises black people and elements of black culture, such as music. On the contrary, Pecola, who always dreamed about reaching white beauty standards and admires Shirley Temple, is smashed by oppression.

Throughout the novel, Morrison revisits the reasons why things happened the way they did. In order to do so, she reviews the whole cultural, economic and racial context of a society. She never puts one character in charge of all the unfortunate events. Morrison's novel highlights the existence of a whole system of oppression, where everybody is a part of: sometimes oppressing, sometimes being oppressed. *The Bluest Eye* recalls readers that although this system works, most of the time, in a cyclical way, it is not unbreakable, and it might be overcome through strong resistance.

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