

The bluest eye

[History](#), [African American](#)



Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: A look at Sexism and Racism Toni Morrison, the author of *The Bluest Eye*, centers her novel around two things: beauty and wealth in their relation to race and a brutal rape of a young girl by her father. Morrison explores and exposes these themes in relation to the underlying factors of black society: racism and sexism. Every character has a problem to deal with and it involves racism and/or sexism. Whether the character is the victim or the aggressor, they can do nothing about their problem or condition, especially when concerning gender and race.

Morrison's characters are clearly at the mercy of preconceived notions maintained by society. Because of these notions, the racism found in *The Bluest Eye* is not whites against blacks. But instead it is about the racism of lighter colored blacks against darker colored blacks and rich blacks against poor blacks. Along with racism within the black community, sexism is exemplified both against women and against men. As Morrison investigates the racism and sexism of the community, she gives the reader more perspective as to why certain characters do or say certain things. Morrison provides the reader with a light-skinned black character whose racist attitudes affect the poorer, darker blacks in the community, especially the main characters, Claudia MacTeer and Pecola Breedlove. Maureen Peal comes from a rich black family and triggers admiration along with envy in every child at school, including Claudia. Although Maureen is light-skinned, she embodies everything that is considered "white," at least by Claudia's standards: "Patent leather shoes with buckles... fluffy sweaters the color of lemon drops tucked into skirts with pleats... brightly colored knee socks with white borders, a brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur, and a

matching muff" (P. 62). But Claudia and her sister Frieda are able to recognize "the thing that made Maureen beautiful and not them" was only in terms of its effects on other people (P. 74). Despite knowing that they are "nicer, brighter," they cannot ignore "the honey voices of parents and aunts and the obedience in the eyes of [their] peers, the slippery light in the eyes of their teachers" when Maureen is around or the topic of conversation (P. 74). The way Maureen dresses and behaves in front of adults is not the only way she affects Claudia and Frieda. With racist comments such as, "What do I care about her old black daddy... and you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute," she infuriates the girls, for in their eyes Maureen is black too. Racist attitudes like Maureen's affect the poorer, darker blacks and can eventually lead them to think racist thoughts of their own. Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, experiences racism within the black community when she moves to Lorain. Being a dark-skinned black woman from the south, she does not understand why "northern colored folk was different... and why they were no better than whites for meanness" (P. 117). She recognizes the hierarchy, or the "difference between colored people and niggers" within the black community, especially from the light-skinned women she encounters (P. 87). One of these light-skinned black women is Geraldine, Junior's mother, who believes "colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (P. 87). She even tells her son that she does "not like him to play with niggers" (P. 87). The other light-skinned women of Lorain feel the same way as Geraldine about dark-skinned black people, which forced Pauline, without even realizing it, to place racial stereotypes on the light-skinned black people in her community. The racist attitudes of both blacks and whites lead Pauline

to a very vulnerable state of loneliness, so she finds comfort even in taking a job as a servant at a white family's house, the Fishers. She finds contentment in this companionship, despite the fact that she is demeaned the family, as exemplified in the words of Mr. Fisher, who states of Pauline, "I would rather sell her blueberry cobblers than real estate," indicating the Fisher's assumption that a black servant could not possibly understand the commercial world (P. 127). Pauline is so blinded by her loneliness and all the racism she has endured that she does not even realize what her employers think about her. Because one of the few jobs open to dark-skinned black women is a servant or a nanny, she is forced to take this job and ultimately ignores her family. Her life falls apart right in front of her, but she cannot do anything about it because the racism she receives affects her so much. Racism has been so ingrained in Pauline, and most of the characters in the novel, that it is not even questioned, but rather accepted as reality. Racism is not the only thing that is detrimental within the black community. While racism is one of the most important themes in *The Bluest Eye*, the topics of sexism and sexual abuse are central to a novel based around a rape. Morrison starts the story with the gruesome fact that Cholly Breedlove will rape his daughter Pecola and she will have his baby. There are two more sexual encounters in the novel where force is involved: one with two white men forcing Cholly Breedlove to have sex in front of them, and the other with Henry Washington forcing himself upon Frieda MacTeer. These sexual encounters differ in their victims, aggressors, and reactions afterward. Although there exist these variations, Morrison channels the idea of sexism within the black community and sheds light on how much of a problem it

really is. When Henry Washington, a man who rents a room from the MacTeers, nearly molests Frieda, her father protects her by almost killing him. In most people's eyes, this form of rape, a man forcing himself on a woman, has the most common people as the aggressor and the victim: the male is the aggressor and the female is the victim. And her father chasing after him shows the common form of reaction to a rape, when a father feels hatred towards the aggressor. Frieda's concerns about being "ruined... like the Maginot Line," a local prostitute, and being affected negatively for the rest of her life are commonplace for lots of rape victims (P. 101). Morrison explains this rape in detail before the other two more complicated rapes in a kind of hierarchal order from best and worst case scenarios, the worst being Cholly raping his own daughter. During the time period in which the book takes place, in the early 1940s, sexuality was not something understood as openly as it is today. In this societal context the reader sees the institution that lays the foundation for the guilt, shame, confusion, and classification of sexism. While it is uncommon for men to be victims of rape, Morrison shows that it can happen. She reveals how the cycles of abuse from victim to aggressor can and do provoke Cholly to inflict pain, in this case rape, even though he has been a victim of sexual abuse in his youth. And, although it seems that this is really only an illustration of the sexism that Pecola faces when her father rapes her, it places Cholly as victim of sexism. This provides the reader with an examination of sexism as it affects the males as well, for it portrays them as powerful, mean, aggressive, and somehow desired. This puts the men in a vulnerable and stagnant category as well, for it allows no room for men of gentleness. Many of the female characters hate men even

though they desire them. Geraldine, Junior's mother, does not allow herself to enjoy sex with her husband, for she avoids "having to touch or feel too much of him... she stiffens when she feels one of her paper curlers coming undone from the activity of love... and hopes he will not sweat" (p. 84). She never lets herself relax with him. Cholly and Pauline Breedlove fight physically with each other all the time, the fights usually starting because Cholly will not do something Pauline wants him to do. Even though Cholly is always "drunk... and takes money out of her pocketbook," she always comes to forgive him by having sex with him. While these men may not know it, they have control over their wives, especially Cholly, for Pauline never leaves him even though he abuses her, tries to burn the house down, and eventually rapes his own daughter. While it is not obvious to the reader at first, Cholly is a very sexist man and is very hateful towards women. Of the two sexual encounters Morrison writes about him, there is a strong feeling of hate towards the females he has sex with. While he is having sex for the first time as a teenager with a girl named Darlene, two white men, while hunting, find him and make him finish under the light of a flashlight. The only thing Cholly can think of during his ordeal is "his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters" (P. 150). He hates her so much because she is "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence" (P. 151). But then he feels horrible guilt when he knows that "he has not been able to protect, to spare, to cover Darlene from the round moon glow of the flashlight" (P. 151). He never thoroughly deals with this anger nor this guilt because he feels the same anger when he rapes Pecola. He asks himself "Why isn't she happy""

when he sees her at the sink doing the dishes. He wants to take care of her but he is also angry with her for allowing himself to feel a sexual desire for her. This power Cholly has over Pauline and Pecola is a double-edged sword, for he cannot control his actions but they never leave him or desert him. It should be understood that Morrison's novel is filled with many characters and many examples of racism and sexism and the foundations for such beliefs in the black community. Every character is the victim or an aggressor of racism of sexism in all its forms. Morrison succeeds in shedding light on the racism and sexism the black community had to endure on top of racism and sexism outside of the community. She shows that racism and sexism affect everyone's preconceived notions regarding race and gender and how powerful and prevalent the notions are. Within the community, racism affects how people's views of beauty and skin can be skewed by other's racist thoughts; sexism shapes everyone in the community's reactions to different forms of rape.