

# Violent women in the bluest eye and beloved essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



The black female characters within Toni Morrison's novels are often scarred by their surrounding, oppressive environments. Whether they are racially exploited, sexually violated, or emotionally abused, these women make choices that cannot be easily understood in order to coexist with these scars. Specifically, many of Morrison's female characters turn to violence. She resists the temptation to portray only positive or idealistic characters, but rather represents black women as realistic and varied. The complex characters in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* reveal feminist issues concerning black women through violence.

*The Bluest Eye* explores the destructive consequences of the standard of beauty when adopted by a poor, black community. Nine-year-old Claudia begins to realize a need for rebellion when she discovers her invisibility in popular culture. Her hatred of white dolls starts with Shirley Temple, who danced with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, a famous black tap dancer. " I couldn't join in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but 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 20).

This explanation proves that Claudia feels something has been stolen from her and given to Shirley Temple instead. The performance pairing of the adult black male and the small white girl highlights the absence of the small black girl performer – the performer who looked like Claudia (Harding and Martin 84). Claudia's feelings of black invisibility become even more evident when she receives white baby dolls as gifts. She dismembers them, and by

doing so, she denies her obsessive worship of white attributes and rejects them for her own blackness, forcing others to see her and not a reflection of whiteness.

The outward violence of Claudia is similar to the internal violence another black girl in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, demonstrates against herself for the same reasons. Hated and despised by her mother and ignored by her father, Pecola exemplifies the destructive power of accepting white beauty standards (Denard).

Realizing that the “white immigrant storekeeper” who she is buying candy from, shows only “distaste for her, her blackness” (Morrison 49-50), Pecola embraces all things white and accepts a self-hatred: Shirley Temple, white baby dolls, the white Mary Jane on the candy wrapper, and her want to have blue eyes. There is no doubt that Pecola accepts the shaming of her blackness, eventually breaking under the weight of white oppression in her surrounding community.

In the most destructive violence possible, some mothers in Morrison’s novels end the lives of their children – in infancy and childhood, as in *Beloved*. After being free from slavery for a mere twenty-eight days, Sethe destroys the “property” for which the bounty hunter and slaveowner have come, because Sethe “wasn’t going back there ... any life but that one” was preferable (Morrison 40).

Wendy Harding’s analysis indicates that “rather than a sign of individual deviance, the grotesque exposes a global contradiction imposed by racial

oppression” (Harding and Martin 27). Similarly, Christopher Peterson suggests that Sethe must “ kill her own daughter ... to claim that daughter as her own over and above the masters claim” (Harding and Martin 53). Sethe’s decision is only understood when the reader steps back and realizes the choices available to her and recognizes that, through violence, Sethe redirects her own black powerlessness and lack of self-identity into a maternal possession and dominance.

Sethe may be the most infamous in *Beloved* for her brutal decision, but is not the only mother who resorts to violence. Readers learn how Sethe comes to her grotesque decision by learning more about her relationship with her mother. Sethe’s mother is known as “ Ma’am” and is a complete stranger to her, but is the only child of hers that is encouraged to live. This indoctrinates into Sethe the concept of mothers choosing life or death for their children (Denard). Told by another slave woman after Ma’am’s death, Sethe learns about her birth: “ She threw them all away but you.

The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of a black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around” (Morrison 60). Ma’am could not escape the multiple rapes and their subsequent pregnancies, but she rebelled by refusing motherhood until she got pregnant by someone she could accept and put her arms around.

Carolyn Denard's analysis indicates that even though Ma'am actions and decisions are not discussed more fully in the novel "they surely would have taught Sethe the importance of power, choice, rebellion and motherhood" (Denard). The concept and power of choosing motherhood and the burden associated with deciding life or death is established for Sethe from early on in her life.

Ranging in age from children to adults, Morrison's violent female characters choose violence to find an escape. The choice of violence redirects the powerlessness and lack of self-identity within their communities and transforms it. This pattern of violence emerges in some during early childhood, as in the case with Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. Through realizing their own self worth and identity are questioned, Morrison young black girl characters deny white oppression and redefine the limits of their power and powerlessness. They dispute with physical violence to find strength when they are often in positions of weakness (Gates).

Morrison's youthful characters learn about violence within the matrilineal home, when they are exposed to violence toward and from their mothers, as in the case with Sethe in *Beloved*. Enslaved and oppressed, Morrison's adult women character is abused frequently by multiple sources. Consequently, the woman's own mistreatment is often redirected on her children. Painful and harsh, this redirection can also be seen as a mothering lesson to teach black children how to cope within a world that denies their own self-worth (Gates).

These female characters, flawed but also attempting to manage situations far beyond their control, choose violence. They transform from powerless subordinates to dominating forces. They choose their own destiny, even if their future is lonely or tragic. As a result, these violent females provide a new understanding of violence and its relationship to personal power and community.

#### Works Cited

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