

Comparison of main themes in everything is illuminated and the bluest eyes

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Everything is Illuminated vs The Bluest Eyes

The novels, *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *The Bluest Eyes* by Toni Morrison, both focus on how the past affects people in the present or future plays a significant role. In *Everything is Illuminated* we see how his upbringing and the anti-Semitic culture in Ukraine has affected the life of Alex. In *The Bluest Eyes* we see how childhood trauma and bullying affect the main character, Pecola. Similarly, in both books we see how family relations can negatively impact children as they grow up.

Well recognized psychologist, Sigmund Freud, first introduced the idea of The Unconscious, the Desires, and the Defenses. This theory loosely suggests that humans tend to repress painful memories in our subconscious and because of that these repressed memories in turn into either desires or defenses. We are first introduced to Alex, in *Everything is Illuminated*, as a seemingly rich, popular, and vibrant young man, however in reality he lives a quiet, suppressed, and somewhat abused home life. He describes how his father yells at him and has a very hard hit and how his Grandfather sometimes berates him. Dealing with this from a very young age has caused Alex to desire a life away from his family and his “destined” path in the family business and his defense against his harsh home life is creating a whole new persona within himself. Pecola Breedlove, from *The Bluest Eye*, is the victim of bullying, hate, and abuse from the moment she is born. She is “ugly and black”, made fun of by the kids at school, talked about by the adults in the town, and hated by even her own parents. She desires to have blue eyes because she believes that with blue eyes, she will gain a new

outlook on life. Her defense against all the negativity in her life is dreaming about her blue eyes and eventually convincing herself that she has blue eyes. These blue eyes give her a delusional sense of happiness which leads to everyone seeing her as mad.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedlove family is full of misfortune, darkness, and tragedy. Cholly Breedlove is a devout alcoholic man, with a tragic past, who cannot support his family, but instead abuses them. Pauline a. k. a Polly Breedlove is Cholly's wife who was once beautiful before she lost her front tooth and reverted to working as a house main. Sammy Breedlove, their oldest child has a habit of running away from home to escape from the depressing reality of his home life. Finally, Pecola Breedlove is the youngest in the family who passively endures the abuse and neglect from her family. In their small hometown, there was an air of sadness and shame that followed whenever someone brought up the Breedloves. " You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question." (Morrison) Nobody loved the Breedloves, including themselves, and this was most detrimental to Pecola.

At the tender age of twelve Pecola has gone through so much sadness and shame that no child at her age should suffer from. From the second she was born as a Breedlove she was doomed. She was ugly, dark, poor, abused, and impregnated and still no one wanted to help her. As, Morrison shows

throughout the story, all of these things had a visibly negative effect on Pecola. Being a young child, still innocent in thought Pecola desperately wanted to have blue eyes. To her, having blue eyes would change her whole life for the better. “ It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different.”

(Morrison) Tragically, however, Pecola’s fight for blue eyes mixed with her doomed reality, Pecola went mad.

In *Everything is Illuminated*, the first character we are introduced to is Alex. From the readers first impression of Alex, he is a handsome, intelligent, and rich young man who is often sought out by women. “ If you want to know why so many girls want to be with me, it is because I am a very premium person to be with. I am homely, and also severely funny, and these are winning things.” (Safran Foer, 2) However, it does not take long for the readers to see that the depiction that Alex is sharing of himself, is a mere facade. The perfect, happy Alex is shown to be fictional as we meet Alex’s family and see the relationships they share. Alex lives with his father, mother, little brother, and grandfather. The most notable relationship is that of Alex and his father. From the very beginning Alex shares that he and his father do not get along and that his father uses his fists to discipline him. “ When I look in the reflection, what I view is not Father, but the negative of Father.” (Safran Foer, 54). Alex wishes to be the opposite of his father, he wishes to leave the Ukraine and go to Russia and he wishes to be a better

man than his father. However, his father does not care what he wants and often shuts down Alex's dreams and desires.

Throughout the novel, we get to see Alex from a more vulnerable side and it is clear that he is struggling with finding himself. He has been hidden under the strong arm of his father for so long that when he gets the chance to be special, he lies about himself to others whenever he gets the chance. " This is a thing I have never informed anyone, and you must promise that you will not inform it to one soul. I have never been carnal with a girl. I know. I know. You cannot believe it, but all of the stories that I told you about my girls who dub me All Night, Baby, and Currency were all not-truths, and they were not befitting not-truths. I think I manufacture these not-truths because it makes me feel like a premium person. Father asks me very often about girls, and which girls I am being carnal with, and in what arrangements we are carnal. He likes to laugh with me about it, especially late at night when he is full of vodka. I know that it would disappoint him very much if he knew what I am really like." (Safran Foer, 114). Eventually, Alex admits to Jonathan that the reason he lies about himself is because he is afraid of disappointing his father and others around him. From a psychology point of view, Alex uses these lies as a way of escaping reality and because he seeks validation from others, which is a result of his unhealthy relationship with his father.

" I knew that some victims of powerful self-loathing turn out to be dangerous, violent, reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over. Others surrender their identity; melt into a structure that delivers the strong persona they lack. Most others, however, grow beyond it. But

there are some who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it. They are invisible. The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before their ego has “ legs,” so to speak. Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents, dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, re-enforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed.” (Morrison) This quote from the General Introduction of *The Bluest Eye*, best encompasses both Pecola and Alex. Pecola allows herself to become passive and invisible, eventually succumbing to the negativity in her life. However, Alex tries to surrender his identity, he attempts to make a whole new version of the man he wishes he could be. Unlike Pecola, Alex has people in his life that love and care about him and because of this he is able to prevail and overcome his self-loathing.