

# Denver, sethe's youngest child, is also affected

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Denver, Sethe's youngest child, is also affected by Sethe's violent choice.

She barely escaped being slain by her mother. Denver is eighteen years old before she can step outside her house by herself and ask for help from the people of the town. She needs their help to prevent Beloved from killing her mother, because Sethe has chosen to suffer for her slain daughter. When Denver finally chooses to take that step to get help, she is choosing to pull herself out of the mud, and to start living.

Before, she had simply existed, and it was a limited existence at that. When she started making choices and exercising her free will, Denver gained a freedom she had not known before. In this freedom she found meaning, and her life gained the essence it had been lacking. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola never had Denver's freedom of choice. Pecola's ability to make choices was slowly chipped away by her family, and by the people in her society.

Conversely, the black people of Pecola's society made several choices, all of which had direct negative repercussions on Pecola. " We saw her sometimes .

. . . After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads.

She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not afraid of her, laughed outright" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*206). The townspeople could have saved Pecola from her mother and her father. They could have tried to help her. Instead, they chose to despise her and to ridicule her.

They denied Pecola the love and compassion that could have saved her; they left her drowning in the mud. The townspeople denied Pecola essence. Polly, Pecola's mother, denied her daughter essence by hating her and choosing to love a little white girl instead. Cholly, Pecola's father, denied her essence; his actions pushed Pecola over the edge, and even prevented her from being able to subsist at the barest level of human existence. Pecola “. . . stepped over into madness, a madness which protected her from us .

. . .” (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*206); it was a place where she was safe, but where she was incapable of choice.

Pecola was denied essence, and her anguish was complete. Anguish, or anxiety, is another existential theme. This theme states that anguish is the dread of the nothingness of human existence; existentialists proclaim that anguish is thus the underlying condition of human life. As a result of this thought, some existentialists reject ideas such as happiness, optimism, and hopefulness, because these ideas reflect a superficial understanding of life. Therefore, that which conventional Western culture views as desirable, existentialists view as a foolish way of denying the despairing, tragic aspects of the human condition. This attitude agrees with certain veins of Jewish and Christian thought, which regard human existence as a fallen existence, lived in suffering, sin, guilt, and anxiety (Eiermann).

Throughout all of *Beloved*, there are examples of anguish and anxiety. Foremost is the agony of racial slavery: the anguish of one person being owned by another person, simply because of skin color. Slavery is the torture of a race which is owned and bought and sold for endless generations, each

generation treated like animals. Morrison vividly portrays the anguish over injustices suffered in such a state: whipping, sexual exploitation, the destruction of the family...all of these things her characters suffer. All of these indignities haunt these former slaves for the rest of their lives.

The concept is appalling beyond words. But Morrison writes it all down and gives it language. She explores Sethe's guilt over having to kill her baby and the anxiety of making that action reasonable to the ghost of that same dead child. She delves into Denver's anxiety over Sethe's decline into nothingness. It is this anxiety that finally forces Denver to seek help from the world outside her home. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's anguish and angst is the most total. Her world is destroyed, and so is her reasonable mind. Her anguish is complete and irreversible.

Her existence, without the support of those around her, is total nothingness. Ultimately, only others can provide essence to Pecola, something which they deliberately withhold. Pecola is the epitome of existential anguish: there is no hope for her, no happiness. She lived out her days as the social pariah of her town, living a fallen, absurd existence. Absurdity is a major theme of existentialism that asks, why here? Why this action and that consequence? Existentialists believe that to exist as a human is inexplicable and absurd. Often, when authors are delving into the subject of absurdity, they contemplate specific things in life that are absurd and unexplainable (Eiermann). In *Beloved*, the obvious absurdity is slavery. While people today may find the concept of owning another human being outrageous, in a

recent time period, slavery was thought of as a positive good, not a cause for outrage.

Slavery was normal. Morrison commented on this when she mentioned that “students have complained about the offensiveness of the explicit sex scenes in *Beloved* . . . but they take for granted the real obscenity, slavery” (Stone 11). That the children of our society have accepted and forgotten the horrors of this institution signifies that though the actions have changed, the attitudes have not. The lesson has not been learned.

The absurdity continues. The evidence of slavery in *The Bluest Eye* is more subtle. Though slavery had been abolished, racism had not.

The language and the law changed, but actions and attitudes did not. Black people were still subjugated by whites. White ideals were filtered through black society, presenting an image of beauty that black people could never attain, nor should they want to attain. In trying to attain the ideals of a society that was culturally different, Pecola destroyed in herself that which was unique to her first as a person, second as a black person. Absurdly, the marginalization and the devastation of Pecola is grounded in superficiality.

Her mother thought she was ugly, so she withheld love and support, and protection from her father. Black society thought that she was ugly, so they ignored her, hated her, and regarded her as a pariah in their society. All of these gross absurdities thrust upon Pecola finally culminated in her mental anguish and death. Some existentialists, such as Sartre, believe that death is

the final absurdity (Eiermann). The consideration of death has taken two main paths in existential writings.

The first is that death is a person's finest, most significant moment, when he fulfills his personal potential. Existentialists who advocate this thought maintain that if a person takes death into his life, acknowledging it and facing it, then he will free himself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life. Thus, he will be free to become himself.

Sartre disagrees with this line of thought. He says that death is as absurd as birth-it is simply the wiping out of a person's existence as a human being. Death is total nothingness (Eiermann). There are many deaths in *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*. In *Beloved*, slavery was the ultimate death-of freedom, and often of body and soul. Slowly, both were broken.

Sethe knew this slow death, and she felt that mortal death was better than slavery. So she killed her baby, to prevent her from dying in slavery. After this death, *Beloved*, impossible to forget, comes back.

However, she dies a second death, but this time she is forgotten. *Beloved* became nothing. In *The Bluest Eye*, the principle death is Pecola's spiritual death, when she breaks down mentally. Then her baby, fathered by her own father, dies; it was born too early.

These deaths are represented symbolically when the marigolds do not live the year Pecola has her father's child. ". . . the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year . . . certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear .

. ." (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 206). The marigolds represent Pecola, who was not nurtured by anyone that year, and her baby, who she in turn could not nurture. Pecola became nothing.

Nothingness is an existential theme that is often associated with death. It is the thought that as an existentialist, one must reject all philosophies, sciences, political theories, and religions that fail to recognize humans as conscious beings. It is believed that these institutions attempt to structure the absurd world, and that there is nothing that structures that world.

In this rejection, one is stripped of all unacceptable structures including knowledge, moral value, and human relationship. In this void, in this nothingness, one can also see the last major theme of existentialism, alienation (Eiermann). Nothingness can also be the theme of despair, and in *Beloved*, there is an awful abundance of nothingness and despair. The slain baby becomes a void in *Beloved*, physically and psychologically feeding on Sethe and trying to make her pay for her saving act of murder. Sethe gives willingly of herself to her ghost child. She feels like she must show *Beloved* why, to save her, it was necessary to kill her. In doing so, Sethe creates a void within herself, a nothingness where she feels nothing and gives everything up to *Beloved* in an awful penance.

Pecola's "unbeing" represents the largest void in *The Bluest Eye*. She did not see herself until she hallucinated a self, to compliment her on her blue eyes. By that time, she has lost her mind. Pecola's nothingness is augmented by the fact that it is ultimate and not reversible. She is alienated within herself, within her nothingness, and she moves others to pity alone. From an

existentialist standpoint, alienation occurs when an individual human being chooses to pursue his "own desires in estrangement from the institutional workings of his society" (Eiermann).

This is the alienation of those who don't identify with the institutions of their own society, who find society empty and meaningless (Eiermann). Often, when people in a society feel alienated, they can make choices to improve their situation. Therefore, their alienation is self-imposed.

However, in *Beloved*, alienation is not a choice, it is the law. "The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy" (Trosky, 325). The resources of an entire culture were geared toward maintaining the grossest alienation of all: the institution of slavery. Slavery was not a subtle alienation, nor was it just psychological. It was powerful and all-encompassing.

It sought to render meaningless everything black people did, said, and thought. Slavery replaced things people find meaning in, like family, with oppression and torture. It was so powerful, it twisted the natural instinct of a mother to protect her child. Slavery alienated an entire race of people.

"The hard theme of *The Bluest Eye* is the degradation and self-degradation, of desperate people perpetuating their own misery while being abandoned by the rest of society, including better off blacks" (Bayles 206). The alienation of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* is total and complete. Pecola is first



alienated by white society, because she is black, but also because she does not fit white society's image of beauty. Thus, she is shunned.

Pecola is also alienated by blacks, including her own mother and father. These are the people that were supposed to protect her; instead they regarded her as a pariah. They hated her for being ugly, but they themselves felt beautiful next to her ugliness. "All of us-all who knew her-felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her" (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* 205). Pecola's self was the only thing she had left, but eventually that was broken, and she had to hallucinate a self in order to continue existence-existence denied essence. As an author, Toni Morrison is trying to give essence and gain meaning. She is a historical author who has made a choice to write about the cruel, absurd existence that her race has had to endure.

She can deliver her people from this absurdity by writing it down, by hashing out the history of her people, for her people. "The book, serving as a go-between, establishes a historical contact among men who are steeped in the same history and who likewise contribute to its making" (Sartre 70). This is a history she carries on her shoulders, one that all black people must carry on their shoulders, for it is this history that defines them.

It is the telling of this history that can pull them out of the mud, that can give their lives the meaning they have been searching for in such an absurd world. It is through this writing that Morrison sings the blues so terribly, so beautifully, that one cannot walk away unchanged. "...

she offers everyone-not just those injured-the chance to feel the pain, the injustice, and the need for healing" (Steiner 239). The cathartic experience Morrison provides has the power to pull all out of the m