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Finding the Why: Trauma's Origins and Effects in Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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FINDING THE *WHY*: TRAUMA'S ORIGINS AND EFFECTS IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

A Thesis

by

HOPE KRISTEN LOPEZ

Submitted to Texas A&M International University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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ABSTRACT

FINDING THE *WHY*: TRAUMA'S ORIGINS AND EFFECTS IN MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

(August 2023)

Hope K. Lopez, B. A., Texas A&M International University;

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This thesis analyzes the effects of Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, on its readers and the public discourse surrounding the central issue of systemic racism and incest. The central focus of the analysis is trauma in the novel: how Morrison captures that trauma in writing, how the reader encounters and interprets that trauma, and the effects of that trauma on the narrative and the reader. To construct this argument, I apply the lenses of reader response criticism, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies to the novel.

Morrison expressed concern that readers would miss the crucial message of *why* the novel's trauma occurs. However, a reader response analysis of reviews, applications of, and publications about the novel reveals that a majority of readers not only grasp the *why* but are moved, as Morrison intended, to personal change and social activism. Analyzing trauma in the novel with both traditional psychoanalysis and modern trauma studies approaches reveals that the personal traumas of the central characters are all connected to the larger social traumas of racism, sexism, and poverty that haunt the entire community. The conclusion

combines the lenses of reader response and trauma studies to reveal the impact of the trauma in *The Bluest Eye* on its readers, underscores the novel's true significance, and demonstrates why it is simultaneously a deeply devastating and an incredibly motivating literary work.

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CHAPTER I:

INTRODUCTION, CRITICAL LENSES, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Toni Morrison's first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), examines the traumatic effects of systemic racism and oppression on a poor, African American community, revealing how the most vulnerable members of the community bear the brunt of their collective trauma. Due to the complexity of Morrison's characters and the ethical issues they create, her novels resist interpretation with any single critical lens. The scholarly conversation around *The Bluest Eye* most often takes a sociological approach, reaching into the fields of critical race studies, gender studies, and postcolonial theory. Critical works such as Linden Peach's *Toni Morrison* examine the "impact of prevailing white ideologies on the black community" (22), while other theorists focus on black girlhood and black womanhood, the function of the family, and the impacts of racism. As the impact of a text can be measured in the meaning it generates for readers over time, analyzing reader responses to the novel and the meanings they create when encountering the text adds value to the conversation. Additionally, I am most interested in the portion of the critical and reader conversations around *The Bluest Eye* that focus on the many traumas in the novel for the community and individuals, examining how they are connected, inflicted, and expressed through the text. Combining both reader response criticism and trauma studies approaches reveals the trauma inflicted on some readers by their genuine encounters with the text. The readers who grasp and even experience the traumatic impact of the novel generate the most effective meanings in response to

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This thesis follows the model of *Modern Language Association.*

Morrison's question: *why* do the traumatic events of the novel occur and *how* is the reader implicated?

The Bluest Eye tells the story of a young girl named Pecola who is repeatedly victimized by her family and community, and ultimately raped by her father. The narrative opens with the horrific secret that Pecola is pregnant with her father's baby, revealing the end at the beginning, so the rest of the novel's story explains *how*, and most importantly *why* this violation occurred. The novel is divided into large sections by seasons rather than neatly divided chapters, and the narrators change frequently, so the reader must piece together the story from fragments of different perspectives. The primary narrator is Claudia MacTeer, the daughter of a family that takes Pecola in when her father's bad behavior renders her family homeless. Claudia is the most sympathetic narrator to Pecola's plight, but Pecola's mother Pauline and her father Cholly also take over large sections of narration. Through the life stories and perspectives of the major characters, all of whom carry trauma from racism, poverty, and internalized racial self-hatred, the picture of what happened to Pecola is constructed. As the most vulnerable member of her community, she becomes the scapegoat for all their pain and trauma. In the end, Pecola miscarries and her consciousness splits as she believes that she has been gifted blue eyes by God. Outcast by her community, Pecola lives the rest of her life on the outskirts while her community tries to forget their role in her demise.

While this thesis will employ trauma studies approaches, it will not utilize formal diagnostic terms and schema in the analysis of Morrison's characters. The American Psychological Association and other modern medical establishments set standards for diagnoses and treatments that impose meaning on those conditions defined as illness. While

these diagnostical categories are invaluable in the treatment of mental illness in real people, they are often less useful in the analysis of fictional characters. Unlike most physical ailments, illnesses of the mind do not have one definite cause and their symptoms and definitions vary widely across individual, social, and cultural lines. A literary critic has limited access to a character and their psychological makeup to make an accurate diagnosis, and there is little value in diagnosing a character since diagnosis exists in the service of treatment. Instead of diagnostic psychiatric approaches, this thesis will take a psychosocial trauma studies approach: establishing a definition of trauma, analyzing how it is conveyed and its effects. Finally, by applying the reader response approach directly to the trauma in the novel, it will analyze the relationship of the reader to both the literary trauma and to their own.

Literature Review and Theoretical Approaches

Reader Response Criticism

Rising to popularity in the 1960s and 1970s, reader-response criticism posits that literature is only understood in relationship with its *effects*: the response, psychological and otherwise, that the reader has to the text (Thompkins ix). Rather than a unified field of literary criticism, the reader-response approach is derived from the work of theorists in other critical fields such as structuralism, psychoanalysis, and post-structuralism. French semiotician Roland Barthes published the 1967 essay “The Death of the Author,” a foundational text in the larger field of deconstruction, but especially in reader-response criticism, claiming that once writing is taken out of its immediate context, “it is language which speaks, not the author” (Barthes 1323). Barthes’ article labels authors’ control over the interpretation of their works as tyranny, because it limits the potential of the text as a site for

new meaning (1322). Barthes' philosophy and its use in reader response approaches does not preclude the author from having influence over their text, but rather it allows freedom to produce new meaning.

The reader and the act of reading are embedded in the organization of *The Bluest Eye* through the use of modified excerpts from a *Dick and Jane* reading primer. Published between 1930 and 1965, these primers and were taught widely in American schools through the 80s, Dana Teach explains in her essay "Dick and Jane and Nothing in Between: Representation and the American Family" (pars. 1-2). The primers are based on a "look-say" model, and each page features only one new word for the reader (Teach par. 3). In spite of their simplicity, Teach argues that their impact on "educational practices, [] underlying influences to racial and ethnic representation, understandings of gender roles class consciousness, and constructions of other social norms" was notable (par. 5). By primarily depicting the images, roles, and ideals of a white, suburban, nuclear family with heteronormative structure, the primers "impart[ed] a set of prescribed and hegemonic values" to American school children (par. 5). The *Dick and Jane* primers established this image as the ideal nuclear family in the minds of children from a young age, and many American families and individuals could not fit into this paradigm.

The *Dick and Jane* primer excerpts in *The Bluest Eye* seem to be narrated by Pecola and express her idealized, unrealistic desires for herself and her family. At the time of *The Bluest Eye's* setting in the American Midwest in the 1940s, Teach states that *Dick and Jane* primers were at the height of their popularity, and Morrison chooses them as a motif illustrating Pecola's obsession with hegemonic and Eurocentric cultural ideals (par. 14). Regardless of how little Pecola's life resembles that of the happy white girl named Jane in

the primer, she seems to cling to this image as aspirational, trying to manifest it in her own life with decreasing success. Teach concludes that for many young children like Pecola, reading these primers inspires "a dangerous and pervasive self-consciousness . . . rooted in unworthiness and ugliness" (par. 16). In her act of reading the primer, Pecola allows these ideals past her defenses and freely imagines herself as the blue-eyed, blonde-haired Jane, living in a loving and playful family. From what she reads and sees, whiteness and the related patriarchal and capitalistic structures that support it become her answer, and she can only achieve these ideals in her imagination, through a break with reality. Through the reading primer excepts, readers see Pecola both reading and re-writing the content, so close readings of these sections in this thesis apply the theories of reader response criticism to the psychoanalysis of Pecola.

Freudian Psychoanalysis and Early Trauma Studies

Modern psychoanalysis, trauma studies, and many other fields have their roots in Sigmund Freud's psychological theories. Freud's concept of repression began with his observation that patients struggled to recall pasts events, and he theorized that there was a psychological force that kept them in the unconscious mind (*Five Lectures* 28). He suggested that repression "pushed the pathogenic experiences in question out of consciousness" (29), protecting the conscious mind against everything from primal urges to traumatic memories. Freud's work is the foundation of psychoanalysis, which Merton M. Gill defined as a set of theories and therapeutic techniques applied in "the analytic situation more broadly . . . in which someone seeking help tries to speak as freely as he can to someone who listens as carefully as he can with the aim of articulating what is going on between them and why" (Gill par. 7). Traditionally these two people in the psychoanalytic process would be a

clinician and a patient. However, in literary psychoanalysis, the reader and the text are the two entities, with the reader applying the principles of psychoanalysis to the text to reveal hidden meaning, often focusing on the minds of the characters, the author, or both.

By the time he published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud took his general concept of trauma from childhood sexual abuse further to explore trauma in reference to the repression of trauma in combat veterans. In a case of traumatic repression, "the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it . . . He is obliged to repeat the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of remembering it as something in the past" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 18). The repetition to which Freud refers is sometimes called a flashback, the reemergence of a traumatic memory that is experienced as if it is happening in the present. The concepts of repression and flashbacks are central to the field of trauma studies that Freud is credited with founding, although the work of connecting and expanding Freud's theories on childhood trauma and trauma in war veterans was left to other theorists.

Modern Trauma Studies: Herman, van der Kolk, and Caruth

When Morrison published *The Bluest Eye*, the concept of trauma had a place in academic consciousness, but, especially in literary circles, the discourse centered on the trauma of war veterans using Freud's research and the recently emerging Post Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnosis. In depicting the abuse Pecola faced as trauma and displaying its traumatic effects, Morrison was decades ahead of her time. It was not until the early 1990s, when psychiatrist Judith Herman was at the top of the burgeoning field of trauma studies, that victims of incest and other private traumas came to the forefront of the conversation. While most trauma studies scholars still followed Freud's lead in focusing on trauma in

combat veterans, Herman's influential 1994 book *Trauma and Recovery* placed the conversation in a socio-political context but shifted the focus to the home. Herman argued that private traumas like domestic abuse and incest shared commonalities with the public traumas of war and political terrorism (*Trauma and Recovery* 2-3). *Trauma and Recovery* was hailed by *The New York Times* as "one of the most important psychiatric works published since Freud" (Chesler 11). Her willingness to formally research something as ambiguous and taboo as incest and apply the diagnostic seriousness with which trauma from large events of terror was scrutinized lent credibility to private trauma survivors. One of Herman's greatest contributions to this field and her clearest parallel with Morrison was her study of the buried truth of trauma in the unconscious and the difficulty of speaking that trauma aloud. Herman begins her introduction by explaining suppression and reemergence, saying that "[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to be uttered aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable" (*Trauma and Recovery* 1). Like Morrison, Herman adamantly speaks the unspeakable, bringing secret atrocities and their traumatic effects into the light and making their readers subjects to what Herman calls "the dialectic of trauma" (2).

With the influence of Herman's work and of her colleagues such as Bessel van der Kolk, by the late 2010s, the trauma studies field had turned toward the examination of trauma on the individual level. In his 2014 bestselling book *The Body Keeps the Score*, van der Kolk suggested that trauma is stored within the physical body, and that it can be accessed through an encounter with the unconscious mind (5). Van der Kolk's approach is more physiological than his predecessors', as he acknowledges that the traces left by personal, cultural, and familial traumas can leave not only psychological and emotional traces, but "even on our

biology and immune systems" (1). Van der Kolk's biological addition to the neurological study of trauma is the key to the modern approach to the counseling and treatment of trauma survivors, but it is criticized for being too individualized. One of these critics is Herman herself, who pushes back on the individualism in modern trauma studies in her 2023 book *Truth and Repair*, arguing that trauma "is a matter not only of individual psychology but also, always, of social justice" (*Truth and Repair* 1).

Herman's sociopolitical approach to trauma aligns with Morrison's social justice intent that is woven into each of her novels, so Herman's trauma studies lens is particularly effective at revealing Morrison's intended message in the trauma narratives of her characters and their society. Additionally, van der Kolk's individualistic physiological lens provides a critical and novel perspective to examine each of the main characters and how their trauma is engraved and transmitted. Despite their many differences, Herman and van der Kolk were colleagues and friends who combined their efforts to revolutionize the psychological establishment. In her *New York Times* article entitled "She Redefined Trauma. Then Trauma Redefined Her.," Ellen Barry examines Herman's career and van der Kolk's involvement. As colleagues since the 1980s Herman and van der Kolk advocated together for the inclusion of Complex PTSD—which is "the result of reoccurring or long-term traumatic events"—in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Barry par. 19-20). The resulting pushback from some of the field's leading psychiatrists—those who opposed therapy to unearth patients' memories of sexual abuse—was so intense that van der Kolk lost his laboratory and Harvard affiliation (Barry par. 21). While the two clinicians shared many differences, Herman's lifechanging knee injury and the resulting chronic pain that removed her from the trauma studies field for over 20 years was van der Kolk's inspiration for his

book, *The Body Keeps the Score*. Their combined approaches from their different perspectives provide the most useful lens for literary criticism. Both Herman and van der Kolk examine the role of the witness to trauma, and together these contributions to trauma studies allow for a reader response approach to trauma in *The Bluest Eye*, examining the reader's role in the dialectic of trauma.

In the study of trauma and affected individuals, there is a tension between focusing on personal or collective experience. From a scientific perspective, a taxonomic approach to trauma is useful for diagnostic and treatment-focused approaches. Doctors and psychologists identify traumatized people as victims and diagnose that victimhood, creating a plan with a linear timeline for recovery. Traumatized people are given a collective identifier, the diagnosis, integrating the effects of their experience into their identity in a neat and easily recognizable signifier. However, for a traumatized individual experiencing flashbacks or hallucinations, everything is viscerally present; scenes of the past, experiences in the present, and preconceptions of the future all are thought into present existence, casting the traumatized individual into all three realms of time, often simultaneously. Trauma theorists disagree on how this phenomenon should be studied. Some theorists argue that the individual experience is of primary importance, while others emphasize diagnostic approaches. Likely due to Morrison's social activism within her novels, Morrison scholars tend to focus on collective cultural or historical trauma, leaning away from the analysis of individual experiences of trauma. The theorists' views on whether the individual or collective experience of trauma should be emphasized are affected by how they define trauma itself.

Cathy Caruth, a trauma studies scholar who dissects the classic works of Freud with the modern lens of scholars such as Herman and van der Kolk, enters the long-standing

debate on the definition of trauma in her essay "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." She divides trauma into two parts: the traumatic event itself and the latent experience of traumatic effects. The initial experience is an "overwhelming" encounter with "sudden or catastrophic events" ("Unclaimed Experience" 181). Caruth suggests that trauma is not experienced fully at the moment of impact, when the traumatic event occurs, but reemerges later (187). This reemergence is a delayed experience of the traumatic event, manifesting in the "uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). Using the concept of the delayed experience of trauma through a reemergence of repressed memory, Caruth argues that "it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is experienced at all" (187). This theoretical perspective of the "inherent latency" of trauma confers value on traumatic flashbacks and reemerging memories, because they are an inevitable and necessary experience of significant events hitherto not experienced or processed (187). Caruth refers to *rememories*, a term originating from Morrison studies broadly used to describe repression and flashbacks and discussed in detail later in the introduction. According to Caruth's theory, traumatic *rememories* are preserved in the unconscious mind for later experience, and they carry the value of historical record as they are the first and only record of the lived experience of trauma.

In a reader response application of Caruth's theory of latency and repression, as readers experience traumatic repression and reemergence in a narrative, it provides them access to the traumatic event itself, and they experience this trauma simultaneously with the characters. Bearing witness to the emergence of trauma in the narrative, the reader becomes a part of the dialectic of trauma discussed by Herman, caught between the dueling expectations for silence and the need to tell the truth. Conversely, when characters function in a state of

unconscious traumatic repression, that experience can also be withheld from the reader, who is left to analyze the markers in the text denoting the absence of that memory. Pecola survives unspeakable experiences through repression, embodying her history physically and emotionally, and she can only access her true experience through traumatic *rememories* that intrude in the present. The reader experiences Pecola's trauma second and thirdhand, with other voices intervening in the truth of her experience, and they must piece together her story for fragments of truth spoken afterward.

Caruth suggests that trauma is expressed verbally and can be recorded in text and literature. This literature constitutes "a different history of survival" that encodes our historical experience of modernity ("Parting Words" 21). In her essay "Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival," Caruth utilizes an interview with a traumatized child to examine the language and examples in Freud's work on trauma from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. As examined in the introduction, Freud's theoretical work on trauma using case studies of World War I soldiers with PTSD was foundational to the field of trauma studies. According to Caruth, Freud's theory of trauma, which focuses on the death drive and catastrophic events, is applicable in many disciplines, and can be understood through the language of departure and the drive to life that emerges from within the death drive ("Parting Words" 21). Examining not just Freud's theoretical work, but also his creative literary work *Moses and Monotheism*, Caruth demonstrates Freud's connection of his own history and personal losses to both his case study subjects and the fictional narrative that he wrote. Much like Freud's analysis of the dream as a text to reveal base drives and unravel hidden histories, Caruth's approach to trauma in literature examines the subjectivity of history, uplifting trauma narratives as an alternate way to understand modernity. Trauma narratives such as

personal accounts from soldiers are required to understand the full history of war, because their experience of the traumatic impact and the effects is a crucial part of that history. Fictional accounts of trauma such as *The Bluest Eye* hold the weight of history as well, revealing the truths of the experiences of racism and rape as they are: forever engraved on the bodies and the minds of their survivors.

Rememory: Morrison's Beloved *at the Forefront of Trauma Studies*

Morrison's novel *Beloved* introduces the concept of *rememory*, a term that the trauma studies field adopted to understand flashbacks, which are the reemergence of traumatic memories. The main character Sethe grapples with *rememory*, denoting the emergence of memories that were repressed or forgotten. The novel focuses heavily on the concept of haunting, and people, places, and events from the past emerge repeatedly in the present. Sethe grapples with the distinction between memories and rememories, explaining that "[s]ome things go on. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was just my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do" (*Beloved* 43). Sethe describes these rememories as a history of the trauma that she and others have experienced, suggesting that you can "bump into a rememory that belongs to someone else" (43). The ability to encounter another's rememories suggests that they are not just psychological, but in some way tangible. To Sethe, these memories seem to be spatially bound but temporally limitless, and she warns her daughter Denver never to return to the plantation that they escaped, saying,

> "Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the

> place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what." (*Beloved* 43-4)

The plantation where Sethe was enslaved and abused, where her child was born into slavery, where she was beaten when pregnant and ran away from, has gained the power of a specter. Even if the physical place is completely erased, it not only lives on in her mind, but she believes that the trauma she experienced in that location would reoccur for her daughter if she stood on the same ground. For Sethe and for her descendants, the *rememory* of the plantation and the trauma attached to it are both real and present.

The terms *rememory* and *dismemory* that Morrison coined in *Beloved* have gained the force of critical terms in the trauma studies field. For example, in the critical and theoretical work *Milieus of Rememory: Rationalities of Violence, Trauma, and Voice*, Norman Saadi Nikro credits Morrison's term as the central idea in multiple theories that he developed in his critical analysis of trauma. He examines how the Lebanese people exhibit intergenerational memory, as well as the connection between public and private memories, especially of violent and traumatic events. In trauma studies, *dismemory* is sometimes used to denote the "productive forgetting" of trauma as it is buried in the unconscious, or even the politically expedient forgetting of cultural violence (Saadi Nikro 8). *Rememory* is commonly used to denote the reemergence of buried trauma from the unconscious, the re-living of that trauma. Caruth suggests that traumatic reemergence is the first time that a trauma victim fully experiences that trauma, meaning that the *rememory* is a delayed first experience of that trauma. Through the reality of the trauma victim's experience, *rememory* brings the past fully

into the present, causing a temporal disruption in their embodied experience. These critical terms, especially with their roots in Morrison's *Beloved*, are invaluable in the analysis of trauma in *The Bluest Eye.*

Lacan and the Development of Self Under Racial Pressure in The Bluest Eye

Scholars who take an interest in the psychological subtext of *The Bluest Eye* often draw on the psycholinguistic approach of Jacques Lacan, a French psychoanalyst who drew on the work of Freud and his own linguistic approach to develop new theories of semiotics and the mirror stage. In their "Tragedy of Self-Splitting," Ding Yang and Kong Xiangguo provide a psychoanalytic reading of *The Bluest Eye* using Lacan's theory of the mirror stage and the development of the self-image under the influence of racism. The development of an African American voice and space in the literary canon is Morrison's primary objective ("Unspeakable Things" 203), and her characters like Pecola are often disrupted in their development of an *imago* because white-dominated society establishes them as the Other. According to Lacan's theory, the image of the self as an individual is developed in contrast to that which is outside the boundaries of self: the other (Lacan 1164). Rather than looking outward to the other and developing an ideal-I in contrast to another, when Pecola's blackness is identified as 'other' by those around her, she 'others' herself. Pecola's rejection of her own mirror image in favor of a blue-eyed ideal "Jane" from the Eurocentric reading primer results in "self-splitting" (Ding and Kong 317). Her psychosis is then defined as a pathological extension of the mirror stage where the "fragmented body" cannot be pieced into the image of a whole (Lacan 1167). Ding and Kong suggest that Pecola is purely a victim, and that her self-actualization is only achieved through illusion (318). However, the

fragments of Pecola's body throughout the novel that are forgotten in her focus on the eyes are re-remembered and reintegrated through Morrison's writing.

The Lacanian lens is utilized differently by other critical sources. In her article "Re-Membering the Body," Elizabeth Mermann-Jozwiak utilizes the concept of *rememory* from Morrison studies to analyze the discursive politics around Pecola's body. Her article diverges from other scholarship on *The Bluest Eye* by centralizing the racialized and sexualized body in the analysis of the mind. Mermann-Jozwiak traces the division of mind and body and the primacy of the visual sense from Platonic philosophy through cultural studies of gender and female objectivity to critical race theory, explaining how the addition of race to the already gendered and objectified body alters its definition. Pecola's body becomes "the nexus where discourses of gender and race conjoin," a sign whose multiplicity of signifiers are culturally determined and self-destructive (Mermann-Jozwiak 189). Drawing on the Lacanian linguistic theories of the symbolic order, Mermann-Jozwiak argues that primacy of sight and eyes in Morrison's novel dis-members the body, but the novel offers a method of re-membering through the rediscovery of lost and forgotten parts in a pre-symbolic or extra-symbolic process on the fringes of society (193). Mermann-Jozwiak adopts Morrison's label of schizophrenia for Pecola's behavior at the end of the novel. She suggests that Pecola's schizophrenia is the mental consequence of the abuse she suffers, representing the cultural "denigration of the racialized female body," rather than an individualized problem or disorder (192). Mermann-Jozwiak directly engages with Morrison's assertion that Pecola hallucinates a blue-eyed self to make herself visible (Afterward 215), suggesting that her schizophrenia also comes from the split-consciousness of 'othering' herself, of being taught to see her own body as 'other' (195). While diagnostic terms like schizophrenia or post-

traumatic stress disorder do not serve this thesis' purpose, Lacan's theories on the Ideal-I and the formation of self are a useful framework for understanding all the text's central characters and how they develop racial self-hatred under pressure from a racist society.

Context for Issues of Race and Gender in The Bluest Eye

In 1970, Morrison published *The Bluest Eye* in the wake of the civil rights movement, drawing on the social consciousness of race while pushing the boundaries of what was acceptable in public discourse. In a 2003 interview with Steve Paulson, Morrison scoffs at the need to label her as a "black woman writer," calling it unparalleled for any other group in the history of literature; however, she accepts the title and the possibilities it brings (qtd. in Riechers pars. 31-2). Morrison determinedly explored how American culture is shaped by ideas of blackness and whiteness, finding novel approaches to convey the dangers of this dialectical opposition. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison's work of persuasive literary criticism, she explains that "The kind of work I have always wanted to do requires me to learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language from its sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains" (xi). Morrison's inventive syntax and fresh approaches force her readers to see social issues of race in a new light, creating genuine encounters with topics that many have become too comfortable ignoring.

Morrison's novel also employs feminist ideas from the Women's Liberation Movement emerging in the late 1960s while she composed the story. The novel's approach to black girlhood and womanhood allows a rich examination of the intersectionality in issues of gender and race. According to Robin Field, the social "rape consciousness" that led to the rise of what she calls the rape novel came from a "radical branch" of the women's liberation

movement in the early 1970s (35). The "anti-rape movement" was a subset of second-wave feminism emerging in 1970, the year *The Bluest Eye* was published (34). The movement took hold of a corner of feminist intellectual discourse that "deconstructed many rape myths that pervaded American society as well as American Literature" (Field 34). Field acknowledges the limitations of the revisionary work of this social movement in its disregard of the significance of race, class, and other intersectional aspects of the issue (34). Morrison's novel is perfectly timed as a necessary insertion in this anti-rape movement and in second-wave feminism, delving into the intersectionality of rage and gendered power structures in issues of rape.

The Bluest Eye circumvents expectations on how issues from within the black community are handled, especially that of a father like Cholly who rapes his daughter. The pathologization of race is by no means a new idea, and R. Samuel Cartwright's 1851 "Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race" is an excellent example of governmentally and medically sanctioned racism. Commissioned and lauded by the Medical Association of Louisiana, Cartwright's report assumes relationships between body and mind that pathologize slaves' behaviors like escaping as symptoms of racial inferiority (Hammonds and Herzig 63). Stereotyped physical features of blackness are exaggerated to suggest the super-human durability of a race designed for slavery (Cartwright 71-2), while the psychological effects of captivity and abuse are also utilized to justify a sense of racial superiority (80). The pathologization of blackness is a significant background throughout Morrison's body of work, but rarely is it illustrated so clearly and effectively as in *The Bluest Eye.* In their attacks on Pecola and her child, the African American chorus of the novel seems to echo the white supremacist and ableist desire to eradicate blackness and disability from the

future. Their final characterization of Pecola's rape and pregnancy is of "two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly" (*Bluest Eye* 190). While the phrase "like that" stands in for the horror of incest and abuse, the community's main concern is the procreation of dark-skinned blackness, the very blackness that they have vented their internalized racism and frustrations on throughout the novel.

Outline of Chapters

This thesis is composed of three chapters and a conclusion, with the second and third each focusing on a major critical lens. The second chapter, entitled "'Touched but not Moved': Morrison and Reader Responses to *The Bluest Eye*," applies reader response criticism to demonstrate how personal identity and experience can influence the meaning a reader produces in an encounter with *The Bluest Eye*. The chapter examines Morrison's detailed interpretation of her own novel, and how she crafted the narrative, semantics, and imagery carefully to guide the reader to the same interpretation. Morrison was shocked at how many contemporaneous readers missed her intended message, and she labeled the novel as a failure. However, this chapter makes it clear that readers in the over fifty years since the novel was published increasingly grasp her message as communal understanding of and openness to discussing these formerly taboo subjects have grown. This section will demonstrate the prevalence not just of the understanding and reactions that Morrison intended, but also a wellspring of new meanings and interpretations that the text has inspired in readers and writers worldwide.

The third chapter, titled "The Dialectic of Trauma: An Intersectional Analysis of the Individual and Social Effects of Trauma in *The Bluest Eye*," examines depictions of trauma in the novel using modern trauma studies and psychoanalysis. This section examines how

trauma is encoded in the novel, determining what events and forces are traumatic for the collective, and analyzes the trauma of individual characters. Applying the dual model of trauma by separating the traumatic impact of a force or event from the reemergence of traumatic effects reveals the cause and effect of the trauma in the novel, corresponding with Morrison's themes of *why* and *how* trauma transpires. The objective in applying trauma studies approaches to *The Bluest Eye* is creating an intersectional analysis of trauma that considers issues of race, class, and gender. The sexual violence of incest, the open secret at the center of the novel, demands a trauma studies approach to bring Pecola's experience to the forefront.

Finally, the conclusion will combine the reader response and trauma studies approaches to examine the effect of the novel's trauma on the reader and the reader's imperative to respond to that trauma. Some readers' defenses may become barriers to understanding, driving them away from the text self-protectively. However, those readers who allow the novel to filter through their characteristic defenses are drawn into an unwitting sympathy with characters and the community, becoming subjects to Claudia's final declaration of guilt. Like the rest of the community, the reader is accountable for the *why*, the racism, sexism, and economic disparity in society that marked Pecola as the scapegoat. Morrison intended for *The Bluest Eye* to inspire social activism, and the new meanings that different readers bring to the text in each generation result in personal change and social action, even beyond what Morrison intended or hoped would occur.

CHAPTER II:

"TOUCHED BUT NOT MOVED": MORRISON AND READER RESPONSES TO *THE BLUEST EYE*

As a student of English, an editor, and a renowned author, Toni Morrison commands a central role in the interpretation of her own writing. Through her interviews, lectures, forwards and afterwards, and even her own volumes of literary criticism, Morrison provides the intended meanings of her texts for critics and readers. At times she calls out the interpretations and reviews that contradict the objective truths she predetermines in her writing process. This approach makes the formalist assumption that authors are the creators of meaning within a text, and the reader's role is that of "a flawed but reverential seeker after [the] truths" preserved within literature (Thompkins xiii). Writing with intention toward the reader, Morrison aims to change their perspective or inspire action, and if that outcome is not realized, she considers it a failure of both the text and the reader. Morrison speaks of *The Bluest Eye* as a failure because "the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying [Pecola] rather than an interrogation of themselves for the smashing" (*Bluest Eye* 211). As a victim of incestual rape and many other personal and collective traumas, the extremity of Pecola's trauma can cause the readers to distance themselves, avoiding the broader social and personal critique her story presents by pitying her and therefore unintentionally dismissing or "smashing" her. In smashing her character, the reader neglects the very journey of self-reflection and personal responsibility that Morrison intends to inspire in this novel. The tension between Morrison's authorial goals, her text, and the reader can be alleviated through

a reader-response critical approach to her novels, reorienting the power structure and placing the tools to produce meaning in the hands of the reader.

Reader Response Criticism and *The Bluest Eye's* Implied Reader

No author can completely control the meaning that is created by readings of their text, as anything from a short online post to the most thorough published treatise leaves room for interpretation. Reader response criticism looks to the school of deconstruction and Roland Barthes' "The Death of the Author," making the argument that the language of a text communicates to the reader, rather than the author (1323). New readers will generate new meaning from a text, including meaning that the author did not intend to convey, and according to reader response theory, those meanings hold validity whether they correspond to the author's original ideas or not. Authorial intent will always be significant in traditional critical fields, and authors like Morrison can anticipate their readers and carefully construct their texts to provide a specific meaning. However, once the written work is published, readers and critics bring their own creativity and biases into their encounter with the text. Over time, as a text has new readers, new meanings are produced which combine with the meaning conferred by the author to create an ever-growing discourse.

While reader-response approaches vary from critic to critic, according to Jane Thompkins' anthology *Reader Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, these approaches all "refocus criticism on the reader." Reader-response criticisms "examine the author's attitudes towards their readers, the kinds of readers various texts seem to imply, the role actual readers play in determination of literary meaning, the relation of reading conventions to textual interpretation, and the status of the reader's self" (Thompkins ix). In this chapter, I will apply reader-response criticism to *The Bluest Eye*, illuminate how

Morrison constructs her text to suit her implied reader, how the identity of the actual reader affects their role in meaning production, and finally elucidate the effects of the text on the reader and their interpretation. Morrison clarifies the interpretation she expects from her implied reader, allowing a comparison with interpretations from actual readers, leading to a conclusion about literary meaning.

Morrison's 1993 afterward to *The Bluest Eye* analyzes both the novel's intended effects on her *implied reader*, a significant term in reader response criticism, and the actual response of readers over the twenty-three years since its publication. *The Living Handbook of Narratology* defines *implied reader* as "the author's image of the recipient that is fixed and objectified in the text by specific indexical signs" (Schmid par. 1). While an *intended reader* exists only in the author's head when they write and therefore can only be revealed through author interviews (par. 2), there are markers in *The Bluest Eye* pointing to an implied reader. While Morrison's narrator uses childhood memory to apply a young girl's perspective, the level of vocabulary and complexity in both syntax and ideas implies an educated reader. By distorting the text of an elementary reading primer in various ways, Morrison creates an aesthetic of ideal childhood gone wrong. While the simple sentences of the reading primer sections suggest an artless narrative, a high reading comprehension level is required to understand Morrison's poetic prose without getting stuck in the unusual phrasing. Morrison assumed her readers would have the ability to see past the parts of her fragmented structure to the whole picture, but after observing the critical response she expresses regret about using that approach (*Bluest Eye* 211).

Effects of Racial Self-Loathing on the Formation of Self

Morrison avoids explicitly specifying the race of her intended reader, but she says that she wrote *The Bluest Eye* because she wanted to read it (Als par. 5). Picturing the intended reader as Morrison herself, a highly literate black woman, helps explain the complexity of the prose and the social issues addressed in the novel. *The Bluest Eye* examines trauma deep within the black community, and the novel was Morrison's answer to her own questions. Morrison was in her thirties when she wrote this novel, but the inspiration for the narrative was her first-grade encounter with another black girl who confided in her that she was desperate to have blue eyes (*Bluest Eye* 209). For decades, Morrison pondered what could have caused this level of racial self-loathing in such a young girl, but she confesses that at the time she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, "the answers weren't as obvious to me as they quickly became and are now" (210). As she wrote, the story evolved into a depiction of the little black girl who desired blue eyes as the victim of internalized racism from an external, racist society.

The novel is set in 1941 in Morrison's small Ohio hometown, and the reader is welcomed into spaces and issues only occupied by black people, places that she was intimately familiar with. Because of their inexperience in these spaces, non-black readers are naturally voyeurs in these spaces and conversations. The secrets that are told to the reader and the level of access they have to these restricted spaces are the key textual signs that the implied reader is from the black community. Both readers with lower levels of literary education and non-black readers have higher barriers to understanding the novel, and they must dedicate focus and research to comprehend some issues that the implied reader might instinctively grasp because of their minority existence in a majority culture.

When called upon to name the topic of *The Bluest* Eye, both Morrison and volumes of criticism on her novels agree that black girlhood is the central issue. Aside from Cholly Breedlove, the narrators are all female and all reveal how their identity as black girls influenced their development into womanhood and their relationship with society. The implied reader of this text is also female; she is shown a close-up view of female sexual and social development with no unnecessary explanation, assuming she shared in similar developmental milestones and pitfalls. Morrison writes that "the reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties" gave a new direction to the questions that arose from her childhood experience (210). With black women's bodies at the center of the conversation on racial beauty, Morrison wondered why their natural beauty could not be assumed within their own community without outside voices reaffirming them. She concluded that the culprit was "the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" (210). Morrison's novel demonstrates that these internalized assumptions of racial inferiority lead to internalized racial self-hatred.

The novel's black characters exhibit internalized racial self-hatred, revealed to the reader through detailed narration examining both their lives and psyches. Like the rest of her community, Geraldine, the mother of Pecola's classmate Junior, sees Pecola as the negative stereotype of blackness that she desperately strives to avoid in herself. As a "sugar-brown Mobile girl," Geraldine is raised to value "thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners," all to "get rid of the funkiness" of nature, passion, and human emotions (*Bluest Eye* 83). Raised with a hatred of everything falling under the racist stereotype of blackness, Geraldine becomes a black mother who prides herself on cleanliness and approximation to the Eurocentric family ideal. Morrison counterstereotypes these Mobile girls, providing an

extensive description of their rigorous and restrained lives with diction that invokes a sense of suffocation. Their homes never appear dirty, smelly, or lacking in outward appearance but they exhibit a lack of motherly warmth for their children and physical passion for their husbands. To illustrate the suppression of desire, Morrison examines Geraldine's relationship with her sexuality. The novel suggests that Geraldine has never reached orgasm. The only sexual arousal that she feels is when she is cuddling with her male cat or experiences the physical stimulation that occurs when her sanitary napkin slips free of her sanitary belt and rubs her private parts as she walks (85-6). The diction depicting Geraldine's sterile, restrained life over several pages culminates in the internalized racist ideologies she instills in her son, Junior. She teaches him that "the difference between colored people and n—rs … [is that the c]olored people were neat and quiet; n—rs were dirty and loud" (87). This hatred of stereotyped blackness controls Geraldine's entire life and dictates how she meticulously runs her home, in which even her husband is an "intruder" (86). Geraldine strives to banish every marker of blackness from herself, her family, and her home, demonstrating how racist ideologies are internalized by the very people they oppress to become controlling narratives, compelling black women like Geraldine to police their own lives and those around them.

The internalized racial self-hatred of characters like Geraldine and Junior is projected outward in their abuse of Pecola. Junior has a propensity for bullying girls, with a special animosity towards black girls that don't fit into the suppressive mold that his mother exemplifies (*Bluest Eye* 87). Because Pecola is alone and vulnerable, he lures her into his house before throwing his cat at her and detaining her. His behavior towards her suggests that Junior sees her as subhuman and feels not only a sense of superiority but a type of ownership that is a license to harm. When, in her fear, Pecola is tender towards the cat and it responds

affectionately, the sight incenses Junior and he swings it around his head, throwing it to its gruesome death. The description of Geraldine and Junior's upbringing and prejudices culminates when Geraldine shames Pecola by calling her "[y]ou nasty little black bitch" (*Bluest Eye* 92). Using racial stereotypes that she has internalized to harm a member of her own community, Geraldine's abuse further humiliates Pecola. Geraldine imposes the gaze of the prejudiced outsider through the eyes of another black woman, a self-image governed by external prejudice which could be destructive for any young black girl. However, Pecola's array of fringe identities make her particularly vulnerable to this attack.

Morrison's Use of Language and Narrative Voice

The other authorial issue Morrison identifies in her afterward to *The Bluest Eye* is her use of language. She states her difficult project was "holding the despising glance while sabotaging it" (211). Morrison wanted to avoid dehumanizing the characters who abused Pecola while simultaneously eschewing complicity in their wrongdoing. Cholly's narrative perspective thrusts the reader into the mindset of an incestuous pedophile. In a deeply disturbing rape scene, Morrison subjects the reader to the full range of Cholly's emotions and justifications for his violation of his young daughter. Conflicting feelings of guilt, impotence, tenderness, protectiveness, rage, lust, and hatred flow and entwine as the omniscient narrator describes the rape in harrowing terms (*Bluest Eye* 161-3). While the rape scene consists of less than three pages, the preceding twenty-nine pages are dedicated to Cholly's pathetic life story and his own trauma which clearly contributes to his inability to touch his daughter without damaging her irreparably. The reader enters a coerced sympathy for the human emotions at war in Cholly and is subsequently compelled to watch closely as he commits an unspeakable atrocity. Morrison sabotages Cholly's relatability, establishing the wrongness of

his actions by implying the physical pain he causes Pecola (163). Morrison fears that emotional flooding with the trauma and horror of the situation could undermine the carefully established nuance of Cholly's character (211). A reader dealing with the horrifying emotions evoked by observing the scene of a man raping his little girl could find it difficult to focus on the social issues at play and examine themself for personal complicity. If they do not stop reading altogether, the reader might engage in self-protective distancing, disconnecting from the text or villainizing the character, neither of which align with Morrison's goals for this novel.

Reader Responses: The Effects of *The Bluest Eye* on Different Readers

Each of Morrison's novels has an intended message and purpose that she openly discusses in interviews, and while she constructs her prose thoughtfully to control the reader response, she acknowledges when her goal has missed the mark. Morrison created *The Bluest Eye* "to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause (*Bluest Eye* 210)," inspiring the reader to question their complicity and actively change their worldview. Morrison openly expresses her disappointment in the contemporaneous readers' response to the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, suggesting it "was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread" (215). Only after the success of her later novels was *The Bluest Eye* considered worthy of reprint, and Morrison commends the 1994 edition as the "respectful publication" her character deserves (215). Even the most deliberate author cannot control the readers' response to their text. A tension exists in the gap between Morrison's clearly defined goals in writing and what meaning the reader gleans from the text.

Contemporaneous reviews are significant in the study of readers' response to literature. A 1970 review of *The Bluest Eye* by John Leonard for *The New York Times* reveals

an intellectual understanding of the novel's social critique and an appreciation for Morrison's artistry without the introspection that she expected to inspire in her reader. Leonard is a prime example of Morrison's ideal reader: an educated person of influence who could spread her agenda of change. He describes the novel as "an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country," saying it demonstrates the institutionalized waste of the beauty and potential of black women (Leonard 34). Characteristic of *The New York Times* reviews, Leonard's review has a political focus, even including a dig at Daniel Patrick Moynihan—a controversial counselor to President Nixon—who he suggests is uncomfortable with black women (34). Just as all readers bring their personal biases into their encounter with a text, this review is grounded in the issues that are significant to the reviewer. He concludes by noting that "Miss Morrison's angry sadness overwhelms," attributing emotions to the author based on the intensity of her novel (Leonard 34).

Although *The Bluest Eye* was hailed as a critique of society, John Leonard's review echoes the response of many readers who "remain *touched* but not *moved*" (*Bluest Eye* 211, emphasis mine). Even though Leonard succinctly summarizes the core issues of the text, he then focuses on the final lines of Morrison's introduction, stating "[t]here is really nothing more to say—except *why*. But since *why* is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*" (*Bluest Eye* 5). Morrison's goal is for the reader to determine *why* Pecola was victimized, but they must piece together the fragmented narrative to comprehend *how* these atrocities occurred. She purposefully disjointed the narrative into puzzle pieces for the reader, initially protecting them from the emotionally flooding impact of the complete story. Critiquing both herself and the reader in the novel's afterward, Morrison says that her narrative construct "didn't work" because many readers did not reassemble the pieces of Pecola's story in the

way she intended, and they lost the *why* (*Bluest Eye* 216). Leonard is enchanted by the artistry of Morrison's prose and fascinated by her gritty, realistic characters. However, the only *why* that he identifies is the "cultural engine" of "institutionalized waste … [and] merchandized lies" in the capitalistic system (34). Although he recognizes issues of race, gender, and class in the novel, Leonard is more comfortable contemplating the economic roots of these social issues. Like this reviewer, when flooded by the unspeakable events of the novel, many readers find refuge in distancing themselves by pointing the finger outward at whatever issues arising from the narrative that feel least threatening to them. Not grasping crucial parts of the author's intent, these readers walk away overwhelmed and saddened by Pecola's plight, but not compelled to look inward and question their own complicity. This first novel did not achieve Morrison's goal to *move* contemporaneous readers and change their perspective in the way that her 1987 bestseller *Beloved* did, as evidenced by Leonard's focus on attributing feelings to the author and to others rather than examining the root causes of the vulnerable situation of black girls in society.

Another *New York Times* review of *The Bluest Eye* by Haskel Frankel demonstrates understanding of Morrison's goals but argues that she "has gotten lost in her construction" (20). To Frankel, the scene where Pecola goes to Soaphead—a fraudulent prophet who promises her blue eyes—reveals the devastating effects racial prejudice can have on children, "[b]ut the scene occurs late in the novel, far too late to achieve the impact it might have had in a different construction" (20). Frankel invokes the perspective of the average reader, confused by the changing narrators and the division of the narrative by seasons. To Frankel, the web of tangled portraits of narrators and the characters around them is interesting but distracts from the central message. The reader, Frankel argues, is so disconnected from

Pecola by the narrative construction that her eventual mental breakdown "has only the impact of reportage" (20). While the narrative holds the reader back from Pecola for most of the novel, Frankel implies that Morrison's unexpected poetic wording inspires questions that continue to distract attention from her message at the end. Reviews and analyses of the novel often praise Morrison's prose, becoming sidetracked by fixating on unusual phrases, illustrating the issue that readers at all levels of experience can become lost in the novel. However, other reviewers demonstrate their ability to focus through and beyond the novel's poetic language to create meaning and explore new avenues of inquiry.

Psychological Reader Response Theory

The previously discussed reviews demonstrate how the identity and experiences of the reader influence their interpretation of the text. Psychological reader response theory, pioneered by Norman Holland, borrows from Freud and the field of Psychoanalysis to analyze the readers' unique psychological response to the text. Holland posits that readers approach literary texts in the same way that they deal with life experiences. This coping style, which Holland calls an "identity theme," is present in every aspect of a person's behavior, including textual interpretation (120). To explain how a reader's identity theme structures a reader's response, Holland proposes the DEFT model, standing for "*d*efense-*f*antasy-*t*ransformation" (127). When the reader encounters a text, they first filter it through the patterns of defense characteristic of their identity theme. Some texts may not make it past the reader's initial defense response, perhaps because the content or message of the text is too incongruent with the reader's identity theme. Once the text is taken in through the readers' defensive strategies, they project their characteristic fantasies onto the text as readers can "very freely adapt literary works to yield the gratifications of fantasy" (Holland 125). These

fantasies are a re-creation of the text, moving with the pressure of our internal drives for gratification and involving some projection of the reader's identity theme onto the text (125). This fantasy content, first demonstrated by Freud's discovery of Hamlet's Oedipus complex, is the target of psychoanalytic analysis of literature (Holland 125). The fantasy that is pushing for gratification presses forward, from a primitive drive to a "higher" artistic experience that can be expressed to others (Holland 127). The reader's fantasies are finally transformed into a socially acceptable form, becoming a textual interpretation. While Holland's DEFT model is an important development in psychoanalytic studies, it is foundational to the field of psychoanalytic reader response. Applying the DEFT model to reviews and responses from readers of a literary work allows us to analyze their identity theme, including their drives and defenses, leading us to understand how their interpretation is formed.

Holland's DEFT model can be applied to reviewers like Leonard and Frankel whose defenses prevented parts of Morrison's meaning from filtering through their identity theme into their interpretations; however, this model proves most effective in analyzing reviews that move on to the later stages of fantasy and transformation, breaking down the binary between the acts of reading and writing. Readers like *New Yorker* columnist Hilton Als, who are also versed in the act of writing, can freely fantasize for their readers, creating new interpretations that are also texts. In his article "Toni Morrison's Profound and Unrelenting Vision," Als describes his first emotional reaction to reading *The Bluest Eye* as an 11-year-old West-Indian boy and filters it through his grown-up identity theme, just as the narrator Claudia does in the novel. He freely fantasizes his own version of the text as an adult gay man, an identity that his black community in Brooklyn abhors (par. 17). Als says that his community

finds his sexuality ugly, so he identifies with Pecola and the supposed ugliness that her community sees in her blackness. Als also reimagines the charlatan character Soaphead Church as "a celebrated gay West Indian" falling in love and prospering rather than "liv[ing] his life as an outsider" (par. 17). Since his sexuality and the discrimination against it are central to Als' identity theme, he derives pleasure from the fantasy of a man like him fulfilling his pleasure drives in an accepting and supportive environment, quite contrary to the realities in the text. In Als' rewriting, he recognizes the fate of madness that Pecola's community would condemn him to, but he chooses to overturn that fate, rejecting the "manifestation of black American prejudice against West Indian difference (par. 17)." In the act of rewriting, Als transforms his fantasy into an interpretation with a positive image of the future for himself and others who share in his identity, an image that would not have been possible in the world that he lived in during his first reading of the novel.

Along with (re)writing himself into the text, Als also writes Pecola into the present. He reflects that "[p]art of Morrison's genius [is] knowing that our cracked selves are a manifestation of a sick society, the ailing body of America, whose racial malaise keeps producing Pecolas" (par. 16). The depictions of racism in the text resonate with Al's identity theme as a West-Indian man, and he employs the imagery of the sick physical body as an abject representation of the disease of racism that breaks down racial pride and identity in America. Als points to the procedures and products marketed to black women that warp black bodies to meet the Eurocentric standard of beauty. The push for colored contact lenses, skin bleaching creams, and even plastic surgery to thin the lips and nose expose the belief that the characteristics of a black body must be hidden or eliminated for the world to see the beauty in that body. Again, Als translates the fantasies of his drive for acceptance into an

interpretation of meaning in the text, expressing to his reader the social issues at the heart of his and Pecola's struggles.

The identity theme of the reader plays a significant role in their interpretation, and Holland argues that over time, readers "replenish" the text "by infinitely various additions of subjective to objective" (118). The varying identity themes of the readers, evolving with the developments of cultures, social movements, and historical events, combine with the text to synthesize new meanings. As a black woman raising a daughter at the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, Stacie McCormick is a reader who is uniquely suited to find new meaning in Morrison's novel. In her review, "What Flowers Are We Watering?: On Black Girls and *The Bluest Eye*'s Enduring Resonance," McCormick praises Morrison's intersectional focus on racism and gender discrimination because she believes that the black women and girls who are victims of state violence "often enter the conversation as afterthoughts" to their male counterparts (par. 2). With an analysis rooted in the social justice issues of today, McCormick makes a compelling interpretation of the message and importance of the novel:

> This moment calls for a radical reeducation regarding the need to recognize the insidious workings of anti-Black racism and white supremacy not just in policing and prisons, but in all sectors of public and private life. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* can certainly advance these efforts but only if we focus on the Black girl at its center. In this novel, Morrison is pointedly asking us to care for Black girls and women, to risk our lives for them, and to create hospitable soil for them to grow. (par. 10)

McCormick's interpretation questions Morrison's previous conclusion that she failed in her goal of challenging the reader to look at the bigger picture—the *why* of her novel—and be

inspired to take action to change the root causes of poor black girls' suffering. McCormick utilizes Claudia's metaphor of the inhospitable soil to represent the anti-Black and sexist poison in modern society that prevents black girls from growing and flourishing. In the introduction to *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia's marigolds failed to grow and flourish (*Bluest Eye* 5) in the same way as Pecola did. The seeds, representing black girls, did not fail to flourish because they are bad but because the soil of society is poisonous for black girls. The radical reeducation that McCormick demands reaches every corner of society because the insidious roots of racism invade the deepest structures of America life. McCormick's review suggests that she fantasizes about a world in which Pecola could grow up safe and happy, secure in her self-worth. Her own journey from black girlhood into womanhood is a fundamental part of her identity theme, and she projects her young self and the challenges she faced onto both her daughter and Pecola. Transforming her fantasy into an activist's response to the *why* of the novel, McCormick exposes the toxicity of racism in society and advocates working together to create a safer world for black girls like Pecola, her young self, and her daughter.

Since every reader has a nexus of unique life experiences that develop their identity theme, the *effects* of the text can vary profoundly between readers. Reader-response theory intersects most with trauma studies when the text and the act of reading trigger a trauma response within the reader. Award-winning Japanese author Kanako Nishi reveals in her article "On Beauty, Sexual Violence, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" that she encountered the novel as a seventeen-year-old sexual assault survivor in a sailor uniform (par. 5). Nishi examines the fetishization of sailor uniforms and the young girls that wear them in Japanese culture, such as the prevalence of "*Buru-sera* shops" (par. 31). "*Buru*" means bloomers, referring to the revealing shorts schoolgirls were forced to wear in gym

class that "caused our underwear to stick out suggestively," while "*sera*" refers to sailor uniform (Nishi pars. 32-3). *Buru-sera* shops sell these items used to a primarily adult male clientele for sexual purposes, and the business model branched out to offer "high school girl's saliva and urine," and even "their used sanitary napkins" (par. 33). These shops "embod[y] the value placed on girls' sexual immaturity" in Japanese culture and worldwide (par. 4). The sexual exploitation of young Pecola by her father echoed Nishi's childhood experience with objectification and violation, and she recognized the cultural mechanisms revealed in the novel that destroy little girls. While the Japanese culture Nishi describes appears to worship young girls, the burden of sexual objectification and exploitation at a young age thrusts these girls into the sexual marketplace while they still have the vulnerability of youth and inexperience. Nishi eloquently expresses how, as a young girl who was easily influenced by cultural trends, the cultural truths about girlhood and exploitation in *The Bluest Eye* filtered easily through her defenses and spoke to her basest drives and fears.

Due to her personal experience with assault and objectification, the *effects* of *The Bluest Eye* on a young Nishi were profoundly personal. From the first sentence she read, Nishi says the novel "riveted my heart" (par. 8) and, despite the cultural divide, she felt that "*[t]his is my story*" (par. 10, emphasis in original). Analyzing Nishi's encounter with the novel using the DEFT model, Morrison's words quickly slipped past Nishi's defensive strategies, and she began to fantasize, projecting herself into the novel. Pecola's identity speaks to Nishi's trauma as a rape victim, a lynchpin in her identity theme at that time. However, Nishi's capacity for fantasy extends beyond what resembles her life and experiences, and she freely imagines herself as every character in the novel:

> Claudia and Pecola were me. But not just them. Claudia's mother, who scolded her severely for taking apart the baby doll; Pecola's mother, who erected a castle of white beauty around the family she worked for; the girls' classmate Maureen Peal, who called them ugly—they were me too. And the shopkeeper who refused to acknowledge Pecola's presence; the black boys who took pleasure in teasing Pecola; even Cholly Breedlove, who raped his own daughter—they were all, unmistakably, me. (par. 14)

Nishi applies her fantasies to each character indiscriminately, seeing herself in each of them. Morrison desired for her readers to have Nishi's response, not just sympathizing with the victim but also seeing themselves in every role as the bystanders and perpetrators as well. Nishi's encounter with *The Bluest Eye* goes beyond what most readers allow because she lets down her psychological defenses and allows the novel to influence her identity theme. Her interpretation of the novel profoundly changes her future life by challenging her to ask *why*? (par. 38). She discards her sailor suits, transforming her self-image from that of a victim of sexual assault to a survivor and thriver (Nishi par. 34). The effect of Morrison's novel was life-changing for Nishi, who fantasized a future in which she could use her own words to help change how her culture viewed young girls and those who objectify them. Although Morrison questioned the *effects* of *The Bluest Eye* on readers, the novel was a watershed moment for a young Japanese girl halfway around the world, giving voice to her experiences and inspiring her to lead a life of renowned creativity as an author.

The Enduring Effects of *The Bluest Eye*

From *The Bluest Eye* to *Beloved* and beyond, Morrison's writing has had a profound influence on the worldwide understanding of the cultural trauma of racism. *The Bluest Eye*

implicates every reader of every race and identity in the propagation of hate, racism, and the trauma that they continue to inflict on marginalized people. This groundbreaking novel depicts rape and incest as they are, including the stigmatization of victims and the lifelong trauma that they endure in a society that continues to deny their reality. Readers who can comprehend the burden of these responsibilities are those who grasp Morrison's *why*. Rather than being simply touched, these readers are truly moved by her narrative to developing redemptive relationships, personal growth, and social activism. Even though *The Bluest Eye* continues to be controversial decades later for its exploration of the previously taboo horrors of incest and its abject depiction of the ravages of racism on black communities, growing communal awareness of these subjects and increasing openness to discussing them have led to greater appreciation for this novel's prescient truth-speaking. Even though some of the seeds that Morrison planted in this novel initially fell on inhospitable soil, each new generation of readers create evolving, cross-bred perennial blooms of interpretation from those seeds, conveying new meaning across time and cultural barriers.

CHAPTER III:

THE DIALECTIC OF TRAUMA: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL EFFECTS OF TRAUMA IN *THE BLUEST EYE*

Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* was a forerunner, breaking new ground in many areas. In literature, it was the first book in a new genre: the rape novel. In its understanding of the cycle of abuse and its insightful portrayal of multiple types of traumas and their effects on individual and social levels, it was a precursor of the field of modern trauma studies. As the traumas of living in racist, classist, sexist and otherwise discriminatory society press in on the novel's community, the community members pass these traumas on to Pecola. At a time when trauma was not even a proper field of study and incest was not studied publicly, Morrison's insightful and horrifying examination of traumatic events and their effects both individually and socially provided insight that her contemporaries were not fully equipped to dissect. Understanding how and why trauma is received, stored, and expressed by the body and mind offers a new perspective on the central issues of the novel. Applying a lens of modern trauma studies to *The Bluest Eye* reveals not only *how* the events of the novel unfold, but *why* the characters traumatize Pecola and *why* that repeated harm is individually and socially significant. Using psychoanalysis and trauma studies scholars such as Herman, van der Kolk, and Caruth, this chapter analyzes the collective trauma of the community in Lorain, explains how these traumas drive their abuse of Pecola, and reveals another layer of *why* Morrison's novel is significant and prescient in its comprehension of individual traumatic pain and its social origins.

The First Rape Novel

The Bluest Eye is a foundational work in a new genre that emerged in the 1970s: the rape novel. In *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel in Late Twentieth-Century American Fiction*, Robin E. Field defines this genre as "texts [that] portray rape *as* rape, allowing readers to understand the violence enacted upon the victim's body, the brutality impressed upon her mind, and the devastating personal and communal repercussions of the act" (10). While depictions of rape in storytelling predate the foundation of literature, sexual violence was either eroticized or used as a trope, particularly to explore anxieties about gender, race, or class. Conversely, the rape novel personizes the victim's experience, depicting the act of rape vividly and portraying its destructive effects. Field credits *The Bluest Eye* as the first novel emerging in this genre that is now common in many larger genres from memoir to fantasy. Although Pecola's rape by her father is told from his perspective, and it is clearly tied to the larger racial and social issues presented in the novel, the scene is unflinchingly harrowing, denying the thrill that readers can derive from other literary scenes of sexual assault. Despite Cholly's third-person narration, at no point does Morrison allow his justifications to erase the traumatic pain and suffering inflicted on Pecola. Field praises the novel's vivid portrayal of "how the traumatic repercussions of incest upon the victim extend beyond the individual acts of rape to encompass the reaction of family and friends" (87). Pecola's trauma is compounded by the response or lack thereof from her community, silencing her voice and pushing her out when they cannot stand her as a reminder of the unspeakable atrocity.

Morrison tells the forbidden story of incestual rape with sympathetic gaze, allowing the reader to experience Pecola's trauma through the layered narratives rather than

voyeuristically observing. In *Father-Daughter Incest in Twentieth Century American Literature,* Christine Grogan argues that in the novel, "Morrison shows the interconnectedness of racism, rape, classism, and imperialism," demonstrating that the trauma is a public reckoning rather than a taboo familial matter (91). By including the perspectives of community members outside the Breedlove family as narrators and leading figures in her story, the reader is implicated in "maintaining the cultural prerogatives that allow rape and incest to occur" (Field 83). In this rape novel, no character or narrator is free from the responsibility for the trauma, yet in their culpability, they are neither villainized nor dehumanized. If a character like Cholly who rapes his young daughter is not humanized, the reader is given the narrative distance to assign him blame for the trauma. Instead, the novel unflinchingly portrays both Cholly's rape of his daughter and his own sexual violation that drives his twisted views of intimacy and love. Already knowing from the introduction what he will do to his daughter, the reader is dragged through his portion of the narration, compelling sympathy and understanding of his psyche and motivations.

The modern trauma studies theories of Herman, van der Kolk, and Caruth base their theories on the Freudian concept that trauma is pushed into the unconscious mind and can be accessed through the reemergence of memories. In *Trauma and Recovery,* Herman outlines a dialectic of psychological trauma that van der Kolk, Caruth, and many other trauma studies scholars utilize in their work. Herman explains that denial and suppression are not effective, and that "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (1). The "central dialectic of psychological trauma" is a conflict between the will to deny traumatic events, keeping them secret and repressed for self-protection or to avoid social censure, and the will

to proclaim them out loud (Herman 1). Because of this ever-present dialectical opposition, survivors of trauma "often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner that undermines their credibility" (1). If the traumatic story remains repressed, Herman suggests that it may surface "not as a verbal narrative but a symptom" (1), suggesting that even in their silence, the actions and disfunctions of a survivor may be a signifier of the truth that has not yet entered signification. Trauma is encoded in literature in all its stages, from the repressed memory marked by gaps and breakdowns in signification, to the traumatic reemergence as it emerges into signification, to the traumatic effects of that reemergence.

Through the reading experience, a reader can become a witness to the rememories and even the signs of dismemory in the characters and become a part of their dialectic of trauma. Herman explains that witnesses to traumatic events, like the victims of those events, are also subject to the dueling imperatives of the dialectic (2). A witness to trauma struggles to clearly and calmly remember the events, resulting in a fragmented narrative that echoes the victim's own fragmentation (Herman 2). Additionally, it is even harder to "find a language that conveys fully and persuasively what one has seen," so if they speak out, the witness falls into the same trap as the victim, risking their own credibility and social stigma (2). The reader experiences the novel's trauma as an observer, but their role in the dialectic of trauma is anything but passive. From the moment the secret of Pecola's incestuous pregnancy is whispered to the reader, they are caught between the importance of speaking the horrible truth and the expectation of silence on such a taboo subject. Without an understanding, much less an explanation of how and why this occurred, the reader must hold this information until the end of the novel. Even then, the narrative seems to withhold the details that would allow

the reader to speak confidently about what happened to Pecola, rendering them powerless in her hopeless situation.

Collective and Public Traumas: The Community and Pauline

Gilad Hirschberger defines collective trauma as "the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society" (1441). Rather than a historical record that recalls a horrific event, a collective trauma "is represented in the collective memory of the group, and like all forms of memory it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an *ongoing reconstruction* of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it" (Hirschberger 1441, emphasis mine). Research on collective trauma began in an effort to understand the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish survivors of World War II. Modern trauma theorists like Herman have suggested studying other large-scale collective traumas, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001. The continuous reconstruction of the memory of the traumatic event and what it means is the defining feature of a collective trauma. Whether they invoke the language of trauma studies or not, Morrison scholars treat slavery as a collective trauma, since Morrison's narratives employ heavy use of memory, repeatedly incorporating *rememories* of slavery and its racist echoes into the present day.

While few traumas in *The Bluest Eye* meet the definition of collective trauma, even the most private of traumas are inherently public, connected to larger social issues that affect the entire community. For example, when the Breedlove family is forced to live *outside* after losing their home, the circumstances are individual to Cholly and the family members, yet the poverty that drives their plight and the racial injustice that keeps them impoverished are conditions that their entire community shares. Even Claudia, whose protective parents have never put her in danger of becoming homeless, knows that to be *outdoors* "was the real terror

in life" (*Bluest Eye* 17). Even within the stable MacTeer household, "[t]he threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days" and was used to curtail any expense or waste (17). Now that Cholly is in jail and the Breedloves dwelling is burned down, they are forced *outdoors*, a feared and pitiable state in their community, and they collect property and possessions to guard themselves from the same fate (18). Claudia's proximity to the socioeconomic heart of the Breedloves' trauma inspires pity and understanding, and the fact that Pecola has to stay with her makes her a witness to and therefore a participant in her dialectic of trauma.

While not all members of the novel's black community are *outdoors,* they all exist "on the hem of life," living a "peripheral existence" that is the metaphysical version of the physical fact of homelessness (*Bluest Eye* 17). This special metaphor captures the lived reality of the marginalized and poor black community who cling to their possessions and guard their secrets so as not to be pushed further outside like the Breedloves. Their shared identity in marginalization and discrimination increases the imperative for secrecy concerning things like incest that could cast their community in a worse light. In *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, J. Brooks Bouson applies Herman's dialectic of trauma to the "cultural impulse to publicly reveal[, but more so to] conceal the humiliations and traumas endured by oppressed groups like the African Americans" (12). The voices to cultural traumas and even private issues within the black community are silenced from both outside and within, with white society stigmatizing their traumas as 'black problems,' and the black community silencing secrets from within that could mar their carefully constructed façade of social acceptability.

The social traumas of poverty and internalized racism cause Pecola's mother Pauline to neglect her own family while putting all her nurturing energies into her role as a housekeeper for a white family. Unlike Geraldine and the Mobile girls discussed in the previous chapter, whose carefully maintained homes and outwardly proper lives simulate an unattainable standard of cleanliness and righteousness to avoid stereotyped blackness, Pecola's mother Pauline leaves her personal sphere of influence in disarray. The Breedloves' home, when they have it, is cold and impersonal, with the death of the fire in the coal stove representing the lack of emotional warmth and the disconnect of the family members from each other (*Bluest Eye* 37). Pauline spends all her time and effort caring for her white employer's children and home while disregarding the wellbeing of her own daughter and neglecting their living space.

The reading primer excerpt at the beginning of Pauline's section presents an idealized image of her through Pecola's eyes, but the syntax belies the image. Just like her husband Cholly's section that is analyzed later in this chapter, Pauline's primer section is in all capitals with no spaces or punctuation, and the impression that it gives is equally frantic and claustrophobic. In Pecola's declaration that "MOTHERISVERYNICE," the forcefulness of the capital letters contradicts the calm, comforting image behind the idea of niceness (*Bluest Eye* 110). Pecola directs Pauline to "PLAYWITHJANE," the idealized white girl from the reading primer template and Pecola's Ideal-I, after declaring confidently that "MOTHERWILLPLAYWITHYOU" (110). In fact, as discussed later, Pauline does play with the young, blonde daughter of the Fishers, the white family that she works for, showing that 'Jane' all the attentive affection that she withholds from Pecola. In the final imperative—"LAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA"—the extra word 'laugh' is cut off, as if she is interrupted,

but missing the letters from the word ‘ugh,’ the reaction that Pauline regularly has to her daughter (110). The strangest part of this primer passage, seeming to be from Pecola’s perspective like the others, is the fact that Pecola otherwise never calls Pauline ‘Mother,’ instead using the respectful yet distant title, “Mrs. Breedlove” (108). Pauline’s narrative confirms her disconnection from and disgust with Pecola, connected to her own racial self-hatred and search for white acceptance.

When Pecola and the MacTeer girls stop at the Fisher’s household she treats them as trespassers in a sacred space, instructing them to “stand stock still right there and don’t mess up nothing” (*Bluest Eye* 108). Her employers’ very young white daughter enters the kitchen, but upon seeing the three black girls, “fear danced across her face” and she anxiously looks for Pauline (108). Demonstrating her lack of experience with or acceptance of unknown blackness in her white space, the young girl reacts to Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda by yelling insistently for “Polly,” the Fishers nickname for Pauline (*Bluest Eye* 108). Claudia quickly draws the contrast between the older, biological daughter Pecola who is not allowed to call Pauline ‘Mother’ and the little white girl who brazenly yells her demands, calling Pauline by a given nickname. This blatant disrespect triggers Claudia’s characteristic desire to “scratch” the Fisher girl (108), a trauma response to the idolization of young, blonde and blue-eyed white girls that she grew up reckoning with.

Pauline’s preference for her employer’s family over her own is made explicit when Pecola causes an accident in the Fishers’ kitchen. While touching a fresh berry cobbler cooling on the counter out of curiosity or desire for the treat, Pecola accidentally spills the pan, “splattering blackish blueberries everywhere” (*Bluest Eye* 108). Most of the hot juice spills on Pecola’s legs and the burn caused her to “cr[y] out and beg[in] hopping around”

(109). Even though Pecola is engaged in noticeable reactions to physical injury, her mother rushes over to strike her down, "yank[ing] her up by the arm, [and] slap[ping] her again" (109). Then, "in a voice thin with anger, [she] abuse[s] Pecola directly, saying "[c]razy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look at you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor" (109). The fragmentation in her outburst marks the reemergence of trauma, met with a feeling of rage and disbelief. The dark berries smeared across the floor symbolize the staining of the white space with her daughter's blackness. Her repetition of "my floor, my floor" makes it clear that she feels a sense of ownership and pride for the domestic spaces within the Fisher home. Adding insult to injury, Pauline provides comfort, not to her injured daughter, but to the little white girl crying over spilt dessert and in fear of the black children. When the Fisher girl asks who they are, Pauline repeatedly responds with "[d]on't worry none," refusing to name or claim relationship with her own daughter in front of her boss's daughter (109). Pauline's repeated rejection and abuse of her daughter foreshadow her disbelief when Pecola tries to speak the truth about her first rape by her father, causing her to bury the story of her second rape deep inside (200). Pecola comes last on Pauline's list of priorities, and her aversion to and disinterest towards her child make her responsible and culpable for Pecola's second rape and continued victimization.

Generational Cycles of Trauma and Abuse

No major character from *The Bluest Eye* is immune from the cultural traumas that drive the narrative, and the Breedloves have experienced multiple personal traumas that lead to their destructive patterns. While the damage that Cholly inflicts on his daughter is omnipresent in the novel, appearing in the introduction and looming over Pecola throughout the narrative, Cholly's personal trauma influences his unspeakable actions and therefore is

worth examination. Morrison begins the third person narration of Cholly's life halfway through the *Spring* section of the novel. His narrative is a jarring addition to a novel that has hitherto referenced him only as a vagrant who is the destroyer of his family and rapist of his daughter. These facts are part of the *how* that Morrison unravels throughout the novel, but Cholly's backstory provides the grotesque and heartbreaking *why* behind his behavior. Morrison lays out Cholly's life story, from his abandonment as a newborn all the way to his rape of his young daughter, and several events stand out as possible influences in his sexually deviant behavior.

The section containing Cholly's backstory begins with an excerpt from the Dick and Jane primer, inserting Pecola's perspective and reminding the reader of the ideal of fatherhood to which Cholly is compared. All in caps with no word spacing or punctuation, the passage feels forceful and frenetic, and it serves as Pecola's insistent voice. The inquisitive "WILLYOUPLAYWITHJANE" foreshadows his rape of Pecola, which is the only time that he shows interest in his young daughter (*Bluest Eye* 132). She asserts that "HEISBIGANDSTRONG," evoking a hyper-masculine paternal figure, but that size and strength are used for insidious purposes rather than to nurture and protect. The second request of the passage, "SMILEFATHERSMILESMILE," demonstrates the importance that Cholly's mood holds for Pecola. Like his masculine strength, Cholly's mood is something that he uses, consciously or unconsciously, to exploit her. The doubling of the word smile at the end of the passage also breaks from the reading primer template, where the imperative verb would usually only repeat once before and once after the proper noun. The extra "SMILE" emphasizes the frantic tone of the passage, a further twisting of the idyllic storybook setting of a traditional reading primer. Like all the reading primer sections, this

excerpt reveals Pecola's unconscious psychological needs, in this case, a frantic desire for fatherly love and protection that Cholly is unable to provide.

The absence of a mother figure that Cholly could accept is the earliest predictor of his deviant behavior later in life, as it is the earliest trigger of feelings of helplessness and worthlessness in his young mind. Cholly's mother, who "wasn't right in the head" abandoned him at four days old by "wrapp[ing] him in two blankets and one newspaper and plac[ing] him on a junk heap by the railroad" (*Bluest Eye* 132). Chapter one examines the significance Morrison's narrator places on being *outside* as a state of disconnection and despair rather than a simple location. Being cast out like garbage by his mother seems to leave Cholly permanently *outside,* a status that he later inflicts on his own family. His elderly aunt Jimmy rescues him and whips his mother, driving her off and inserting herself as his savior and his sole parental guide on the path of spiritual righteousness (132-3). Christian and religious terms define Aunt Jimmy's approach to parenting, an approach Cholly rejects as the third person narrative later claims that he had "never watched any parent raise himself … knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him" (160-1). In her attempt to raise him as a moral Christian man, Aunt Jimmy names him Cholly after his deceased uncle Charles Breedlove, "[a] good man" (133). Cholly's rejection of Aunt Jimmy's parenting and her religious efforts is displayed figuratively in his idolization of badness, coming to fruition later in his search for his deadbeat dad. While Jimmy does seem to derive a moral self-satisfaction from figuring herself as his savior, her protective and corrective behaviors constitute a genuine effort as a guardian that Cholly rejects for himself and later refuses to emulate with his own children.

The diction Morrison uses to paint Cholly's image of his Aunt Jimmy inspires revulsion in the reader, involving them indirectly in his implicit rejection of her and her worldview. Cholly claims to be grateful for being "saved," but admits that he sometimes wishes she had left him to die, specifically when he is repulsed by the physical signs of her old age. The proximity of the gaze and the forbidden nature of the parts subjected to that gaze evoke a voyeuristic discomfort in the reader, rather than the pleasure that the reader often derives from an intimate look at a literary character. From her "sucking her four gold teeth" to the sight of "her old, wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown" (132), Cholly's rejection of Jimmy as his mother figure is directly tied to her age, the antithesis of the youthful innocence that he is attracted to in women. Despite his ambivalence towards her, the protection she offered him dramatically ends on the day of her funeral when he is assaulted.

The coercion and humiliation of Cholly's first sexual experience is a cruel induction for a child into the adult world, and also an imposition of the racial hatred that he must grapple with for the rest of his life. During his Aunt Jimmy's funeral banquet, Cholly slips outdoors with his cousin and some girls, including Darlene, to whom he has some attraction (*Bluest Eye* 143-5). Away from the group, they engage in consensual sex almost to completion, but are interrupted by two white men who discovered them while on a hunting expedition. They jeer and taunt Cholly, ordering him at gunpoint to "get on wid it. An' make it good, n****r" (148, sic.). The racial power dynamic, accentuated by the multiple slurs the hunters spew, is a clear factor in their coercion. The fact that they are on a hunting expedition and choose to point their gun at black children to coerce the sexual activity highlights two racist biases in their perspective: they don't see Cholly and Darlene as children, and they don't see them as humans. The hunters treat them as part of their sport for the evening,

moving on to their animal hunt at the prompting of their barking dogs rather than watching the sexual act to completion (148-9). The casual nature of their violation and their quick disinterest reinforces the power dynamic, and the helplessness of the children to protect themselves or each other.

The direct transition from racism to racial self-hatred that Morrison highlights with Claudia's dolls and Pauline's white employer's children is evident in Cholly's response to Darlene during and after their victimization by sexual coercion. Cholly nurtures a hatred toward Darlene coming from her role as "the one he had not been able to protect" (*Bluest Eye* 151), but she is a safe outlet for that hatred because of her blackness and her femaleness. Morrison explains that he cannot hate the hunters because "[t]hey are big, white, armed, men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him" (150-1). Like the many community members who transform the racial self-hatred forced on them by a racist society into hatred towards the vulnerable Pecola, Cholly subconsciously protects himself from further trauma and self-destruction by hating Darlene. In this situation of clear racist sexual victimization, Cholly turns his hatred of the perpetrator into hatred for the victim and a desire to become a perpetrator himself.

The feeling of helplessness and powerlessness in life and relationships is instilled deeply in Cholly during this traumatic scene, illustrated by his humiliation about his impotence. After the white men force Cholly to continue the sexual act, he begins to "simulate" sexual intercourse because "he could do no more than make believe" (*Bluest Eye* 148). Having lost his erection, he cannot penetrate Darlene, but "with a violence born of total helplessness … [he] almost wished he could do it—hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so

much" (148). Cholly projects his feelings of hatred on Darlene, desiring to be able to rape "the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence" (151). Impotence becomes a defining feature of Cholly's life, one that inspires violence and destruction. Those feelings of fear and helplessness, and the inability to protect or please trigger the dark side of the manliness that Cholly idealizes, the desire for the power to control and do harm. Lacking agency in this traumatic moment and unable to strike back at the white men who are humiliating him, Cholly wishes for an erect penis to use as a weapon against the defenseless Darlene. With his attraction for her turned to physical repulsion, Cholly establishes his pattern of misdirecting rage at his plight into controlling and exploiting women, especially if they seem helpless. Cholly's first sexual experience at fifteen or sixteen is a violation coerced by two white voyeurs, and the traumatic effect imbues all his subsequent sexual relationships with hatred: hatred for the women he cannot protect, hatred for himself in his failure to protect them and for his humiliating impotence, and hatred for the white men who damaged him irreparably by rendering him helpless in this way.

Understanding the Victim to Abuser Cycle

The multiple traumas of the abusive circumstances of Cholly's first sexual experience and his abandonment by both his parents poison all his sexual and familial relationships, and he becomes a perpetrator. As Cholly's tragic backstory unfolds in the "Spring" section, from his abandonment as a baby, the narrative slowly unfurls toward the scene of Pecola's rape. A clear connection emerges between Cholly's traumas and his inability to control his sexual urges and to perform within the social expectations of fatherhood. The psychological community espouses a long-held belief in a cycle of abuse, suggesting that victims of abuse have a higher likelihood of becoming perpetrators of abuse, and several recent studies seem

to confirm this trend among male sexual abuse perpetrators. A psychological study of victims and perpetrators of childhood sexual abuse by M Glasser et. al. in 2001 found a positive correlation in males between their own childhood sexual abuse, either incest or being victims of pedophiles, and their abuse of children in adulthood (482). Additionally, the loss or absence of parents in childhood, especially the mother, was a significant predictor of later pedophilic perpetrator behavior (Glasser et. al. 486). The coercion in Cholly's first sexual experience becomes both a script that he repeats and a trauma that he carries, evident in the instability of his emotions surrounding sexual intercourse.

The background Morrison wrote for Cholly, a perpetrator of incestuous child sexual abuse, also aligns with the risk factors highlighted by Malory Plummer and Annie Cossins in their 2018 report, "The Cycle of Abuse: When Victims Become Offenders." Their study "discovered evidence to support the existence of a cycle of abuse for male CSA [Child Sexual Abuse] victims who had experienced particular abuse characteristics" (286). Men who grew up in homes with an absent parent or parents were more likely to become offenders (300). Cholly's mother abandoned him at birth while his father was absent since the pregnancy was revealed. Men whose earliest or most significant sexual experiences involved abuse were the most likely victims to become offenders (300). Coerced by strangers, Cholly's earliest sexual experience was a situation in which he was totally helpless. His experience of powerlessness corresponds to Plummer and Cossins' central risk factor for male victims to become perpetrators: situations where the victim "associates trauma and powerlessness with sexual expression" (300). Cholly's experience of powerlessness features heavily in both the scene of his own experience of sexual coercion as well as the scene in which he rapes Pecola.

The Bluest Eye predates the research on the victim to abuser cycle, and the public understanding of the psychology of a rapist, but Morrison captures it vividly and grotesquely in her examination of Cholly, presciently explaining how he became a father who rapes his own daughter. Cholly's internal search for a father figure leads him on a quest to find the larger-than-life biological father he imagines, but instead it ends in despair and humiliation. Finding himself alone in the world as a teenager, Cholly hops a train to Macon to find his supposed biological father, Samson Fuller, who abandoned him before birth (*Bluest Eye* 151-2). When he finds the man his Aunt Jimmy named as his father playing craps, he is a shorter, balding man, who, other than having the air of badness Cholly idolizes, in no way lives up the image he expected (155). In another moment of impotence and identity crisis, paralyzed and unsure how to respond to his father's lack of recognition, Cholly is unable to find words to declare who he is, to whom he belongs, and why he is there. His father dismisses him gruffly, and he runs, returning in that moment of rejection and confusion to a childlike state. Cholly's trauma response to his father's rejection is clear and immediate, as if the rejection has lain in his unconscious since infancy. This event triggers his *rememory*, the traumatic emergence. He exerts so much effort to prevent himself from crying that "his bowels suddenly opened up, and … liquid stools were running down his legs" (157). Following this grotesque description, Morrison makes Cholly's infantilization explicit, declaring that "on a street full of grown men and women, he had soiled himself like a baby" (157). Cholly's regression is complete when he then goes to sleep in the fetal position in a space that is dark, warm, quiet, and enclosed (157), as if he has returned to the womb. The visceral physical and emotional reaction Cholly has to this anticlimactic meeting is the culmination of his lifetime of loneliness from traumatic parental abandonments in vitro and in infancy that he cannot

even remember. His emotional crisis serves as a moment of rebirth where he chooses to disregard the social conventions of family connections and live as badly as he desires to.

Father-Daughter Incest

In her 1991 book *Tell-Tale Signs: Fictions*, Janice Williamson examines the broken signification of Father-Daughter incest in literature, exhibiting how this sexual trauma is encoded and processed within narratives. Seven years after *Tell-Tale Signs* was published, Williamson published a reflection on her own experience with incestual abuse by her father in her book *Crybaby!*, revealing a personal lens that affected her role as reader and interpreter. As a personal survivor of incest, Williamson recognized the syntax signifying incestual trauma, where "only these fractured words are called to mind. She pinpoints the anguish at the moment her father … But this is where the voice becomes confused" (*Tell-Tale Signs* 29). In *Crybaby!*, Williamson reflects on writing *Tell-Tale Signs*, identifying written signs in literature that told a story about her own life that she could not remember (qtd. in Levy 864). Sophie Levy uses Williamson's tale of her traumatic *rememory* to inform her study of father-daughter incest, looking for those places where signification breaks down as the markers of the liminal space where repressed trauma is stored in the unconscious.

Incest is both a violation of public social boundaries of familial relations and the private boundaries of home. Levy explains that father-daughter incest narratives share a "spatial and conceptual" construction of *home* in which there is a clear distinction between inside and outside (865). In incest narratives like *The Bluest Eye* boundaries are "crossed, blurred, and erased" in all the literal and figurative spaces of *home* (Levy 865). Both times that we know of where Cholly rapes Pecola occur within their home: the first time in the kitchen while she is washing dishes (*Bluest Eye* 162), and the second time when she is trying

to sleep on the couch (200). The Breedloves' living space was already literally and metaphorically cold, but the violation of incest casts Pecola into the outside sphere, with a permanence and implications much the same as Morrison's critical term *outside*. Pecola is permanently stripped of the safety of the family structure and home, just as she already is *outside* with no possessions or protection when she arrives at the MacTeer's home.

Pecola's darkest moment is described, not through her own eyes and voice, but from Cholly's third person perspective. However, the evidence of Pecola's life of trauma is clear even through his viewpoint. When he comes home "reeling drunk" to find Pecola alone washing dishes, he initially is revulsed by "her young, helpless, hopeless presence" (161). Pecola's body bears the witness to the pain she has suffered throughout her life, with "[h]er small back hunched over … her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow" (161). As van der Kolk's research on trauma suggests, Pecola's contorted physical biology silently expresses the pain that she carries from the abuse of her family and community. He explains that bearing and concealing the psychological effects of trauma puts tremendous stress on both the body and the mind, since it is, by definition, "unbearable and intolerable" (van der Kolk 2). Having been physically struck but also repeatedly emotionally abused by those around her, her body is hunched and twisted to take up less space, offering less offense to others. Pecola's physiology is a direct response to her psychological wounds. Unlike Claudia's protective father figure, Cholly has had no interest in his daughter's plight to this point and can't comprehend her physical and emotional state. He sees the "clear statement of her misery [as] an accusation," reminding him of the "guilt and impotence" that he felt in his first sexual experience coerced by the hunters (161). He recognizes that it is

unnatural for someone of her age to be so burdened, and it inspires negative feeling in him at his own failure as a father figure to protect her.

Pecola looks on her father with "haunted, loving eyes" (*Bluest Eye* 161), evoking the emotions from the reading primer excerpt that proceeds Cholly's story. In response to Pecola's implicit pleas for his fatherly love, Cholly is simultaneously irritated by her pain, and furious that she loves him. He reacts with the thought, "How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all?," asking himself "[w]hat could his calloused hands produce to make her smile?" (161). Pecola's love feels like an undeserved affront to a man who neither sees himself as a father nor knows how to care for and protect a daughter. Feeling incapable of "accomplishing [anything] that would earn him his own respect" (161-2), Cholly is unable to accept the unconditional love of his daughter because he does not respect himself or believe that he is a man worthy of love. His momentary emotions are the only driving factor in his actions towards his children because he is "dangerously free" (159), not bound by any restraints or social expectations.

Cholly's familiar pattern of feeling impotent, leading to projecting his feelings of revulsion and hatred on others is disrupted by positive feelings towards his daughter that he twists into a sexual attraction. When Pecola scratches her leg with her toe, Cholly is caught in the memory of the day he first saw Pauline make the same gesture (*Bluest Eye* 162). He feels a "wondering softness … a tenderness, a protectiveness" that he is unaccustomed to in his life, even towards Pauline (162). He feels the same urge to taste her that he had with her mother years before, and he experiences the wonder of returning to relive a pleasurable moment from the past without all the pain of the intervening years. He crawls up to nibble on her calf in the way he approached Pauline that day, but instead of laughing easily like she

did, “the rigidness of [Pecola’s] shocked body [and] the silence of her stunned throat” is a more pleasing reaction for him (162). Cholly claims to be driven by tenderness, even protectiveness, but the fact that he is titillated by her stunned reaction reveals his real motivations: power, control, and exploitation. It is the concoction of memory and taboo, “the confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing,” that turns his feelings into lust, sexually arousing him (162). The explicit diction for his arousal accentuates his vile actions, while revealing his underlying state. Cholly’s potency thrills him as “a bolt of desire [runs] down his genitals, giving it length,” but it also “soften[s] the lips of his anus” (162), revealing the unguarded, unchallenged sense of power that he feels while assaulting his vulnerable daughter. In the subsequent rape scene, Cholly achieves what he could not in his other sexual experiences: he dominates her body completely on his own terms.

Markers of the Victim’s Voice

Despite the discomfort of reading this rape scene from the perspective of the perpetrator, Morrison provides five major markers of Pecola’s pain and horror, adding another level of discomfort to the reading experience. Firstly, the “rigidness” and “silence” (*Bluest Eye* 162) when Pecola is shocked and stunned by Cholly’s approach is a common trauma response mentioned in Herman, van der Kolk, and Caruth’s writing. In the face of the traumatic event, the psyche is overwhelmed, paralyzing the victim or even triggering dissociation (“Unclaimed Experience” 187). Cholly’s narration claims he wants “to fuck her—tenderly,” but “the tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear” and he makes a “gigantic thrust” into her (*Bluest Eye* 163). The tightness that Cholly blames for his increased violence is a sickening sign of Pecola’s youth and virginal status, but these factors

are a source of excitement for her twisted rapist. Upon his violent thrust into her, Pecola makes her only sound: “a hollow suck of air into the back of her throat. Like the rapid loss of air from a circus balloon” (163). This wheezing is the second insertion of Pecola’s pain in the scene, with her breath replacing all the cries and pleas of a victim who believes they have a chance to defend themselves or be rescued from a perpetrator. Cholly revictimizes a child who cannot defend herself because she is already paralyzed by her previous multiple victimizations.

In reading Pecola’s trauma response to her father’s advances and violations, there should be no confusion about Pecola’s unwillingness to participate in the incestuous act. Shockingly, some critics misinterpret Pecola’s “wet, soapy hands on [Cholly’s] wrists, fingers clenching” (*Bluest Eye* 163) as a sign of her own arousal at the assault. A victim’s physiological arousal during sexual assault and abuse, especially child abuse, has been a keystone of many victim blaming narratives, but Morrison allows no such argument. Even Cholly, the perpetrator, admits that her grip might be “a hopeless but stubborn struggle to be free” that he ignored until after he ejaculated inside her (163). Simply reading the next paragraph, containing the most uncomfortable detail of the scene, dismisses any misconceptions concerning Pecola’s desire for the assault. In his third-person voice, Cholly complains that “[r]emoving himself from her was *so painful to him* he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of *the dry harbor of her vagina*” (163, emphasis mine). Despite just ejaculating inside his daughter, her vagina is so dry that it is extremely painful for him to pull out, indicating that there was no lubrication and therefore no arousal from Pecola’s body. This is perhaps the hardest line to read in the entire novel, but Morrison pulls no punches in speaking the unspeakable, unequivocally portraying this assault as rape. The final markers of

Pecola's pain, the fact that she fainted after the assault and that she has pain between her legs when she "regain[s] consciousness" on the floor of the kitchen, speak as loudly as the rest of her trauma responses.

The entire rape scene is portrayed through the perspective of the perpetrator, Cholly, chasing his own arousal and release, pretending to act out of affection and even love when he is driven by impulse and a desire to dominate. Many rape scenes in literature and film allow the reader to voyeuristically adopt the perspective of the rapist, and there is often an erotic or pleasurable element to the experience (Field 10). Rather than an erotic experience, Morrison carefully constructs this scene to preclude any other conclusion except that this is rape, and it is wrong. However, she separately employs the rape trope, which Field explains "signifies the power of one group of men over other men," where the raped women are used as pawns to express that dominance (83). The "rape" of Cholly by the white hunters twists this trope as they force him to simulate rape to demonstrate their dominance over him. In turn, Cholly's hatred for women and ultimately his rape of Pecola can be interpreted as a displaced response to that victimization. As a black man he is violated by white men, and he in turn violates black women and children since he can exert power over them that he does not have in the face of insidious white domination. In this situation, the rape trope humanizes "the black man who rapes" by forcing the reader to sympathize with his circumstances of poverty and racism (83). While Pecola is at the center of this rape novel, the central victim, Morrison compels the reader into a perhaps unwilling sympathy with all rape victims, even those like Cholly who become perpetrators. In this light, rape in the novel "simultaneously signifies physical and psychological trauma of a human being, as well as the underlying racism within a community" (83). Most importantly in a rape novel, Morrison emphasizes the "inherent

devastation of sexual assault upon the victim" in the sections following Pecola's rape where incest clearly shatters her and her family (86-7). Delicately balancing the scales of blame and devastation, Morrison draws the reader into a position of combined horror and culpability through her visceral depiction of Pecola's rape.

Pecola as the Nexus of all Traumas

In the often-cited 1993 afterward to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison applies her characteristic self-criticism to her first novel, reflecting on her phrasing and the reader response to her story. In her effort "to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause," Morrison says she "chose a unique situation, not a representative one" (Afterward 210). Pecola's "crippled and crippling family" are certainly not to be taken as a microcosm for African American social concerns, yet their context grounds them deeply in racial, economic, and social issues (210). Morrison believes that the innocence and vulnerability of Pecola finds echoes in all young girls (210). While other critics acknowledge the extremity of Pecola's situation, in their analysis they often reduce her character to a metaphorical role as a symbolic victim of the traumas of racial and social strife.

From the first sentence of *The Bluest Eye* to the last, Pecola's traumatic fate is central to the narrative, and her multiple traumas and their traumatic effects on her serve as the nexus of all the types of traumas in the novel: racism, racial self-hatred, sexism, bullying, abandonment, physical abuse, domestic abuse, incest, and rape. Every type of trauma suffered by a member of Pecola's community is visited onto Pecola, marking her body and mind as the scapegoat for the pain of her community. In the conclusion of the novel, Claudia, in her own shame and culpability, eviscerates the community that destroyed Pecola:

> We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (*Bluest Eye* 205)

Reflecting with the clarity of an adult looking back upon her life, Claudia laments the ways her community tore Pecola apart so they could pretend to have all the beauty, grace, wealth, and power that they claimed she lacked. Looking down on Pecola and abusing her gave them a sense of superiority, while pretending to be generous and polite to her made them believe they were truly good. They used her as a foil to develop their own characters, and convinced themselves that she deserved to be used because she did not fight back. Pecola's trauma at the hands of her family and community is extreme, but it evokes the image for the reader of other young victims, such as abused, and silenced little girls, and African American boys and men who die to gun violence and at the hands of police. The continued prevalence of rape and the centrality of children of incest and rape in the debate surrounding abortion evidence the truth of the ongoing social trauma of misogyny.

Miscarriage: Monstrousness and Death

While the inevitability of Pecola's pregnancy by her father is spoken from the novel's beginning, her miscarriage is mentioned by Claudia at the very end of the novel, when "the baby came too soon and died" (*Bluest Eye* 204). The pregnancy and miscarriage are bookends to the rest of the narrative, and the passing seasons correspond to the gestational period of the pregnancy. The community imagines Pecola's baby to be ugly and possibly deformed as the product of incestuous rape between their most reviled members, yet Claudia imagines it with beautiful, distinctly black features such as "black eyes, the flared nose,

kissing-thick black lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin" (190). Claudia and Freida are unconcerned with the genetic origins of the baby because they are too young to understand why it is believed to be monstrous. They want "the baby that everyone wanted dead" to survive so badly that they perform a ritual burying of money and seeds in exchange for the life of the fetus (190). However, with Pecola's eleven-year-old body and the genetic odds from incest, the prognosis is not good. Pecola is forced to undergo the trauma of childbirth in a young child's body, only to have the premature baby die because, like its mother, it is unable to survive in such a hostile environment at such a young age.

Disability Studies: Futurity for the Traumatized

The field of disability studies provides another angle to understand the ending of *The Bluest Eye*. Alison Kafer's work in disability studies examines the markers of disability in the mentally ill, where disability is defined as the inability to meet the arbitrary standards of compulsory able-bodiedness and able-mindedness that comprise what is "normal." Trauma and its resulting neurodivergence creates a different experience of temporality where the past, present and future overlap through anxiety and *rememory*. In her theoretical work *Feminist, Queer, Crip,* Alison Kafer examines the issue of futurity for the disabled and mentally ill, who are often written out of utopic imaginings of the able-bodied and able-minded future. Both Pecola, with her visible signs of madness, and her baby, who is the product of incestual rape, are written out of the future by their community. She lives outside a community who tries not to look at her or what she represents, and to them, her "years folded up like pocket handkerchiefs," creased, folded, and put away from sight (*Bluest Eye* 205). Without acceptance in the present or a place in the future, the mentally ill are trapped in what Kafer terms "curative time," or the compulsory temporal framework that assumes

progress towards cure as the only acceptable movement (27). Kafer's book draws on queer theory's examination of queer liminalities. She proposes curative time as a queer liminality of mental illness, where the life of an individual with mental illness is in the limbo of the *curative imaginary*, a linear timeline from diagnosis to a cure that may never come (Kafer 27). Pecola's internal life is active, yet at a young age, when her mental disturbance manifests, she is cast out of her community *and* out of time itself. Claudia describes Pecola flailing her arms in "an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly" (204). The flailing motion is a marker of visible disability, the moment that Kafer describes when the disabled individual falls out of time and becomes subject to the categorization of others (Kafer 36). For Pecola, Claudia says it is "much, much, much too late," suggesting that the wrongs done to her cannot be undone, but also implying that though she lives, her time is up (*Bluest Eye* 206). The clear idea that Pecola was ruined, that "the damage done was total," casts her beyond curative time and the hope of repair, resulting in her abjection and segregation from society.

Kafer also examines the eugenic desire to write disability and mental illness out of the utopian future through forced sterilization and selective abortion. The implication of these moral choices is that a disabled life is not worth living. Pecola's baby is described in terms of disability; the chorus of anonymous gossip relayed by Claudia suggests the baby will die or "be the ugliest thing walking," due to the brutal beatings Pecola received from her mother (*Bluest Eye* 189). The implication of deformity from incest and abuse is overwritten by the community's internalized racism, vented on Pecola throughout the novel due to her dark skin and features. The community shamelessly defines her as ugly, and her very blackness is characterized as a deformity by her African American community. However, like Kafer, Claudia imagines an alternate future, a place in which Pecola's child could survive and

thrive. Like the baby, the odds in America are stacked against children that are Other, but it is the responsibility of those who understand the problem to create that imagined future in which they have a chance to survive.

Doublethink: Pecola's Self-Splitting and Other Symptoms of Trauma

Pecola's mental splitting is a self-protective measure that also serves as an act of agency, freeing her voice for the first time to speak about the unspeakable traumas that she has kept buried, causing her community to stop victimizing her. Herman's dialectic of trauma captures the conflict within Pecola, who feels incredible pressure to keep silent about her traumas, especially incestual rape, and yet also feels compelled to speak out loud about her victimization to validate her internal reality. In her scene of self-splitting, Pecola believes she is speaking with an imagined, blue-eyed version of herself, the ideal-I that she always wanted to achieve. Blue-eyed Pecola determinedly reveals the truths of Pecola's multiple victimizations, including another rape by her father, a resulting pregnancy, a miscarriage, and her mother's denial of her whole painful history (*Bluest Eye* 199-201). Trapped as she is in the dialectic of trauma, Pecola is of two minds, and for this splitting, an uncanny alteration of consciousness often known as dissociation, Herman evokes the Orwellian term "doublethink" (qtd. in Herman 1). Pecola's doublethink allows her to speak and experience the *rememory* of her trauma in a turbulent experience as the two sides of her psyche vie for control of the conversation. Pecola truly believes that her blue-eyed self is a real being that other people can see, suggesting that for Pecola, it has the same power as the specter of Sethe's child from Morrison's *Beloved*. Blue-eyed Pecola is a *rememory,* a continually reappearing revision of her traumatic memories, the ideal version of herself that should receive the love she was denied.

By living *outside* as a permanent outcast after her miscarriage and her father's death, Pecola protects herself from revictimization and finds a safe place to begin the process of healing from her past. Claiming that Pecola's madness "protected her from [the community] simply because it bored us in the end" (*Bluest Eye* 206), the narrator Claudia admits indirectly that some people were frightened of Pecola in her unbound yet fractured state. While some children "were not frightened by her" and laughed at the physical effects of her trauma, Claudia states that the "[g]rown people looked away" out of guilt because "we had failed her" (204-5). By speaking the truth out loud, moving outside of town, and entirely abandoning the expectations of her community, Pecola finally achieves a type of peace. Healing, acceptance, and continued life are not a given for survivors of severe trauma, but Claudia lives on for and with herself.

CONCLUSION:

THE READER IN TRAUMA

Society, academic discourse, and literature are finally catching up with the place where Morrison was decades ago when she wrote *The Bluest Eye* in their understanding of the real effects of trauma at both the personal and social levels. Analyzing *The Bluest Eye* using the lenses of reader response, psychoanalysis, and trauma studies together opens a new avenue of discourse on the novel. While other critics of the novel employ psychoanalysis and trauma studies in their arguments, this thesis applies a reader response approach that is revelatory because it aligns with Morrison's main objective for her book. While some reader response approaches use Barthes' theories to reject the influence of the author entirely, this analysis compares intended meanings with unintended meanings created by readers to capture the novel's social and cultural impact. Despite Morrison's concerns over her novel's efficacy, over time readers have not only captured Morrison's crucial *why*, but also created new, significant and useful meanings from their readings of the novel. The role of the reader and the work of the author enter a dialectic that generates textual analyses. The characters' trauma and the reader's role as a witness makes the reader subject to another dialectic: the dialectic of trauma. These dual dialectics—the dialectic between the reader and a text and the dialectic mandating the readers silence on taboo traumatic issues while compelling them to speak out—are the wellsprings from which this analysis is born. These new meanings are forged in conflict, through opposition, so they are only created through exertion in the reading, writing, and re-writing processes.

Morrison wrestled with how to communicate the shocking events in *The Bluest Eye* in a way that engages the reader with the characters rather than traumatizing them so much that

they reject the novel's message. The second chapter of the thesis addressed Morrison's dilemma of narrative distance, trying to determine how close to allow the readers to get to the characters to achieve her intended effect: inspiring social activism, without traumatizing them so much that they either abandon the narrative or smash the characters. Chapter three considered the reader as a subject to the dialectic of trauma, witness to the myriad of social and personal traumas in the novel but often left without enough information to put those traumas into words. Readers of *The Bluest Eye* are not just witnesses to the traumatic events of the novel but are so swept up by the fragmentation of traumatic *rememory* that, like the characters, they struggle to fully articulate the hidden truth. The reader is forced to share the secrets of the community as they read, standing too close to ignore the traumatic effects they observe, but also too close to the fragmented narrative to see the full picture that is developing.

The Bluest Eye is a book that many readers start but do not finish because of the discomfort arising from the extremity of its content and the convicting truths it exposes about society and themselves. However, if they read through to the end of the novel, they find a reflection by an adult Claudia on the events of the novel, assigning the blame to herself and her community for Pecola's demise (*Bluest Eye* 204-6). The conclusion by no means resolves the tension arising from the reader's role in the dialectic of trauma, rather providing a succinct explanation for the *why* behind the novel's trauma. The community's avoidance of truth is perhaps the idea that best captures all the other motivations and abuses Claudia describes. She explains that "we rearranged lies and called it truth" (205-6), suggesting all the lies that constituted their reality were constructed on Pecola's hunched back. The truth of the *why* that Claudia finally reveals is encased in the metaphor of the inhospitable soil,

Morrison's chosen device to convey the impossibility of a healthy and happy life for a little black girl and her entire poor black community in a society intent on keeping them down. It is neither Claudia's fault for planting the marigold seeds too deep, nor the seasons' and local ground's fault that the seeds did not grow. All these factors may have contributed to the death of the marigolds before they even began to live, but "the land of the entire country [is] hostile . . . bad for certain kinds of flowers . . . and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (*Bluest Eye* 206). In a social structure hostile to the health and growth of blackness, many innocent black children are lost before their time. For Claudia, the marigolds that cannot grow represent Pecola's miscarried baby, killed by the hatred of systemic racism before it had the chance to live, and Pecola herself, who Claudia calls "the waste and the beauty of the world" (205). Pecola is so traumatized in multiple ways by her society, her community, and her parents that she ultimately flees the community to protect herself from further harm.

Claudia's *why* implicates the community and, by extension, herself and the reader in Pecola's trauma and her fate. Not just those who abused Pecola, but all those who stood by, watching and whispering, are at fault for the traumas she endured. Traumas like her incestuous rape are intensely personal, but every trauma in this novel is connected to our "soil:" the racial, economic, and gendered power structures which we all either reinforce through our actions or become complicit in through our lack thereof. The conclusion to the novel is the catalyst intended to *move* the reader, triggering the reemergence of trauma they have witnessed throughout the novel and instilling the idea that *it is not ok* for the story to end like this. It is not ok for little black girls like Pecola to be used and thrown away, 'othered' by their community and country, who turn blind eyes to their victimization and

devastation. Morrison and her novel challenge the reader to ask *why*, and then to stop being bystanders through taking social action to end the scourges of racism and rape and engaging in caring for the victims, helping them in whatever way they can to find safety and healing.

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