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The Bluest Eye – Sex and Gender

Abstract

This paper is meant to highlight what it is to be black and female and poor in white America. More specifically, it shows how false ideals of beauty and love of the dominant white culture can seduce young blacks especially girls, exemplified in *The Bluest Eye* by Pecola and can cause immense damage to them psychically; it also shows how victimization at the hands of whites can traumatize young blacks and impair their capacity to love in a healthy way; and finally how in a society where blacks play a subservient role in the whites and try to behave like whites, they tend to deny their own sexuality.

Key –Physical love, commercial love, emotional love, sexuality and blackness, white, child molesters.

Introduction

Toni Morrison, in the third part i.e. *Spring clubs* romantic love with physical beauty and calls them “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought”. But while the quest for the physical beauty is a major theme in *The Bluest Eye* the quest for romantic love or rather the popular notion of it is only part of the writer’s engagement with love in the novel. In fact in a 1977 interview she acknowledged that love is the central theme of all her work.

Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I’m writing about love or its absence. Although I don’t start out that way ... But I think that I still write about the same thing, which Key is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it... or are tenacious about love.

So far as *The Bluest Eye* is concerned, Sex and love are a major preoccupation which is natural in a bildungsroman, a novel about growing up.

Sexuality and children

The curiosity and fears of children towards their awakening sexuality are brought into sharp focus in the episode of the discovery of Pocola's menstruation in the beginning itself. She is now capable of bearing children and is in a sense more vulnerable than before. These are hints that anticipate her later pregnancy. Pocola's innocent query-how do you get somebody to love you? - Though unanswered in the beginning, is tragically answered in the end when her own father makes love to her. It was not a pleasant experience for her. Even this is foreshadowed in the text. Miss Marie, one of the whores, has told Pocola about her love for Dewey Prince. Pocola wonders', "what did love feel like? How do grown-ups act when they love each other? ... Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed". "He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat and wouldn't let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there". She naturally associates the event with "chocking sounds and silence".

The episode in which four black boys hurl insults at Pocola for her black skin and for relaxed sleeping skin of elders is also very revealing.

Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnecked. Black e m black e mo ya dadd sleeps necked. Black e mo..

The insults at once help us to get an idea of the self-hatred of these black children and also help to prepare us for Pocola's helpless encounter with her father later on. The tragic irony is that the fatal love of her father is all the love that Pocola will ever experience. The adult Claudia's comment on the episode also anticipates Pocola's status as a scapegoat:

They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.

Commercial Sex

Commercial sex in the form of three black prostitutes, China, Poland and Miss Marie, forms an important part of the collage of sexuality in the black community being described in *The Bluest Eye*. Living on the margin of society, these women have banded themselves together and represent reverse exploitation. They hate “men, all men without shame, apology, or discrimination “and merrily victimize their clients whenever they can and their clients come from all sections: Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever-all were inadequate and weak, all came under jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath”. This suggests that commercial sex is a great leveler. Toni Morrison’s portrayal of them is sympathetic- they are described as “Three merry gargoyles. These merry harridans”- for they sympathize with Pocola who apart from Claudia and Frieda is shunned by everyone else- This incidentally is another evidence of Toni Morrison’s avoidance of moral absolutism in her portrayal of characters.

Love that Hurts/ Cholly Breedlove

Cholly begins her life as a homeless child. His father Samson Fuller had run away and his mother had abandoned him on a junk heap when he was four years old. It was his Great Aunt Jimmy who retrieved him from the junk heap and brought him up till she died when he was 14. A key event in his early life happens during Aunt Jimmy’s funeral when he is sexually humiliated by two white men while trying to have sex with a cousin in the open. The white men surprise them in their love making and shining their flashlight on his behind urge him to carry on: “Go on. Go on and finish. And nigger, make it good”. This is a key episode for several reasons. This traumatic event renders him incapable of expressing his way in a positive Darlene. It is also the first of a “myriad other than humiliations, defects and emasculations” that Cholly is to face in his life and that fills him with hatred for the whites and plunge him into depravity.

Second, his horror at having impregnated Darlene and his running away to seek his father’s guidance shows the rightness of his moral impulse. But the rejection by his father leaves him morally adrift, free, “dangerously free” as Toni Morrison puts it: Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perception and appetites, and they alone interested him. Henceforth his life takes a down turn.

When we first meet him in the novel his marriage to Pauline has already been shredded into violent quarrels. As a result of his accumulated frustration, he has lost all ambition, hope and curiosity and has sunk into drunkenness.

Inadequate as a husband, he is even more inadequate as a parent. Why does he rape his daughter? Cholly's emotions at the time of rape are confused. When he comes home drunk he finds his 11 year old daughter Pocola standing hunched over the sink, washing dishes. "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love". Her posture with her head to one side as though crouching from "a permanent and unrelieved blow" fills him with revulsion. She was a child – unburdened – Why was not she happy? The clear statement to her misery was an accusation. This is succeeded by her guilt at his own helplessness to do anything for her: "what could he do for her – ever? What give her? What say to her? What could a burned –out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven year old daughter? Just then an innocent gesture on her part – one foot scratching the back of her calf with her toe- which is similar to Pauline's gesture at their first meeting, sparks off a burst of desire in him together with tenderness. It is in this befuddled state of mind that he closes in upon his daughter.

In another interview Morrison remarks," he might love her in the worst of all possible ways because he can't do this and can't do that. He can't normally, healthy and so on .So it might end up this way(in the rape).Clearly Morrison wants us to understand the circumstances and helplessness wants to show love and give something of himself to her but he is incapable of doing that in positive way. The only thing he thinks he can gift to her is his manhood- his ability to procreate- that's all that is left to him. His rape then is love that appears as violence, an example of what has been called "horrific love".

At the end Claudia understandingly acknowledges:

Cholly loved her. I'm sure he did. He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelope her, give something of himself to her. But his touch was fatal, and the something he gave her filled the matrix of her agony with death. Love is never better than the lover.

Death of Pauline's Dream

Pauline's case illustrates what happens when a black young woman abandons herself to her quasi-religious fantasies about a savior and later absorbs vague romantic dreams and values from the movies that she sees. All this proves a major disabling factor in her relationships with her husband, her children and her surroundings.

Like a typical teenager, Pauline used to fantasize. She is acutely of her deformity in her foot and at fifteen imagined that someone would come to redeem and deliver her and by his mere glance straighten her foot: part.

In Church especially did these dreams grow? The songs caressed her, and while she tried to hold her mind on the wages of sin, her body trembled for redemption, salvation, a mysterious rebirth that would simply happen, with no effort on her part. In none of her fantasies was she ever aggressive; she was usually idling by the river bank, or gathering berries in a field when a someone appeared, with gentle and penetrating eyes- who with no exchange of words; and before whose glance her foot straightened. The someone had no face, no harm, no voice; no odor...the Presence would know what to do . She had only to lay her head on his chest and he would lead her away to the sea, to the city, to the woods...forever

The entry of Cholly in her life is like the expected coming of the stranger. "He came big, he came strong, he came with yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music". But this does not last long. Cholly is not the dependable romantic hero Pauline wants. Later when the marriages start deteriorating, she seeks escape into the comfortable world of movies. Her dreams are revived. Inevitably the world of the movies glamorizes white standards and values. These she absorbs uncritically.

She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full form the silver screen.

In the pictures she finds the fulfillment of her fondest wishes:

There at last were the darkened woods, the lonely roads, the river banks, the gentle knowing eyes. There the flawed became whole, the blind sighted, and the lame and halt threw away their crutches. There death was dead, and people made every gesture in a cloud of music.

Her alienation from her grim surroundings is complete:

The pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard.

Her overvaluation of white beauty results in her self-hatred. An even more serious result is her emotional impoverishment. Having little self-esteem she is unable to show love or affection to her husband or her children.

Pauline is a hardworking woman who has a talent for arranging things and who derives immense satisfaction in doing so. She could in fact be called an artist whose potentialities have remained unrealized. (“she missed- without knowing what she missed-paints and crayons “)

When her world lies in a shambles around her, Pauline goes back to church, neglects her home, fights with her husband furiously and seeks satisfaction in being a martyr who has to bear the cross of her husband and children. (“Holding Cholly as a model of Sin and failure, she bore him a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross”)She also tries to bolster up her self-esteem by being an ideal servant in the home of a wealthy white family, the Fishers (“Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise”)

Pauline of course looks after Pocola after the rape by her own father but her Alienation from her own in the incidental spilling of the hot berry cobbler but Pocola in the Fisher kitchen .When the doll child in the Fisher household asks Pauline who she (Pocola)is, virtually denies her own child.

Child Molesters

There are child molesters too- two of them and both are sex- starved. There are- Henry Washington who is a roomer with the MacTeers and who touches Frieda on her breast and is thrown down the stairs and out of the house by Mr. MacTeer. The other is Soaphead Church who similarly exploits and whose act of giving blue eyes to Pecola gives her final push into insanity.

Sexuality among the Whites

White Sexuality comes off poorly in the novel. The two whites who surprise Cholly and Darlene in their lovemaking are presented as voyeurs. They are obviously obsessed with the framed sexual prowess of Negroes and urge Cholly to perform. The irony is that this is urging emasculates the boy and traumatizes him.

Conclusion

Sex and love - Love among the blacks in *The Bluest Eye* could be defined either by its absence or distortion. Its absence or distortion could be traced to the unattainable ideals of love and beauty that are broadcast in thousand different ways in white America and which ultimately fill the unresisting blacks with self-disgust and which cripple them emotionally and psychologically. Another source of distortion is the humiliation suffered by the blacks at the hands of whites. Since most characters in the novel are typical, what happens to them applies to a large number of blacks like them. This makes the picture of the state of love among the blacks as presented in the novel representative.

References

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