The Universality and Originality of the Search for Identity in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Introduction

The Bluest Eye, published in 1970, is Toni Morrison's first novel, based on the author's experience concerning one of her elementary schoolmate's remarks that she wanted to have blue eyes. The story is set in Lorain, Ohio, between 1941 and 1942, and is told from the viewpoint of an 8-year-old black girl, Claudia. Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. Due to her friend's sentimental tone soliciting sympathy, the young Morrison "got mad" (p.209)[1] at her friend's unusual desire. This unforgettable experience became her starting point as a writer. Through this experience she became aware of, and began to observe, the structure of "racial self-loathing." (p.210) Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, and the Nobel Prize in 1993, and up to the present she continued to write about the quest for self-esteem both in the community and from the point of view of the individual. As Morrison said in an interview with Danna Micucci in 1992, "the search for love and identity runs through most everything I write."[2] In this novel, each character shows us how each individual attempts to survive and build, keep, or lose one's self-concept in this white-centered framework. Morrison uses her deep insights and painstaking composition. Each character is a representative of a certain type of racial group, social class, or type of personality. In this paper I will analyze each character's way of forming a self-concept through four layers: the land, the community, the family, and the individual. Chapter one analyzes the invisibility of black people in the predominantly white country of America, chapter two focuses on the value standards inside the black community, and chapter three focuses on the parental influences on their children, then chapter four focuses on how the characters face their situation by way of their anger reactions on a personal level.

[1] Morrison, Toni. 1970. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: A Plume/ Penguin Book, 1994.

[2] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "An Inspired Life: Toni Morrison Writes and a Generation Listens", *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 278.

Morrison said this is “a genuine black book,”[3] however, her belief as a writer is to write universal novels by writing specifically about a particular world.[4] This thesis compares some notions with novels written about white people by white writers.

Chapter I. The invisibility of black people in white America

> "Give me your tired, your poor,
> Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
> The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
> Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
> I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

This is a quotation from the poem, "The New Colossus" (1883) by Emma Lazarus, and is inscribed on the American symbol, the Statue of Liberty. However, this enormous American dream has both a bright side and a dark side. This chapter will analyze the invisibility of a minority people inside the white-centered American dream framework, and how the minority people try to exist as a part of it.

1. The American Dream and the invisibility of the minority:

The prologue of *The Bluest Eye* begins with the familiar elementary school story of Dick and Jane which is symbolically quoted and occurs in the story seven times, and which is ironically paralleled with the situation of the characters as the story goes on:

> Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling.

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[3] Morrison, Toni. “Behind the Making of *The Black Book*”, *Black World*, February 1974, p. 89.
[4] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille. ed. 1994. “The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 124.

> Smile, father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good time. Play, Jane, play. (p.3)

As the story continues, this repeated quotation which portrays white America by degrees, loses its capitalization and punctuation, and all grammatical structure. In an interview with Thomas LeClair in 1981, Morrison, when referring to this quotation, stated that she wanted to make her readers visually see the difference of what it was like to see the white life-style as another civilization from the viewpoint of blacks.[5] In the same interview she also says, "What is hard for me is to be simple, to have uncomplex stories with complex people in them, to clean the language, really clean it." (p.123). Morrison's attempt resembles what Langston Hughes did in 1925 in his poem, "I, too" or "Let America Be America Again". Whitman celebrated American democracy and he "sang" for both males and females on an equal level. He covered the people of almost all social classes and races in magnificent poems such as, "One's Self Sing", "I Hear America Singing", "America" or "Song of Myself"[6] from his hopeful viewpoint. They were excellent poems; nevertheless, the reality was far from his vision. So Hughes "sang" the reality of black life with the implications of those of Whitman's, by saying, "I, too, sing America…I am the darker brother…I, too, am America."[7] Hughes changed Whitman's poem from a white point of view into a black point of view while following almost the same process of description as Whitman. Whitman had an expansive vision for his America as a land of many races. He was white, he was a person of the early 19th century, but he already had feelings and consideration for minority people. Furthermore, he treated this issue in his poems many times. Hughes was a big fan of Whitman, so his intention to cover and arrange Whitman's poem was not to take revenge on him for his poem. The real America was not like the ideal future vision described by Whitman one hundred years ago. That's why Hughes entitled his poem "Let America be America Again" or "I, too, sing America". Here "America" implies the way Whitman described the ideal "America" (1888). Morrison was born 30 years after Hughes and *The Bluest Eye* was written three years after Hughes's death. The situation of racial discrimination was still severe

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[5] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison", *Conversations with Toni Morrison.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 127.

[6] Whitman, Walt. 1993. "One's Self Sing", "I Hear America Singing", "Song of Myself". *Leaves of Grass*. The Modern Library. New York: Random House Inc., pages 1,13,33

[7] Hughes, Langston. 1994. "I, too". *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Knopf and Vintage Books.

although it was much better than the slavery era. When we compare the style Hughes followed and the way he arranged Whitman's "America" we see it is in a positive way, whereas Morrison's style and arrangement of Dick & Jane's "America" is very negative and introspective. All the characters in *The Bluest Eye* are Americans who have been living there for several generations. However, their existence is negated in the scenes about Dick and Jane because they are colored people. This quotation intimates that the reason why the seeds of marigolds did not sprout, is because , "the land of the entire country was hostile" (p.206) and, "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquire and say the victim had no right to live". (p.206) So these happy, peaceful, and innocent lines in Dick and Jane represent the tacit approval of every value standard and the casting vote for life and death. Morrison uses an effective symbol in the prologue using the seeds of the marigolds which did not sprout because of the unyielding earth. The marigolds and the earth symbolize the influence of the environment on the individual which builds one's personality. This quotation concerning Dick and Jane substantiates the invisibility of marginalized people in America, but Morrison arranged this to illustrate America from the point of view of marginalized people.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows us specific examples of the invisibility and the negligence exhibited toward marginalized people. She employs a symbolic episode about a traumatic sofa in the Breedlove house. They bought it new, but the fabric had split straight across the back by the time it was delivered. The store would not take responsibility, and the white man who delivered the sofa palmed them off with half-truths and tried to confuse them probably because they were black. It means a white man would have no hesitation in giving them defective products, and he also does not care or is not afraid of what they may feel or if they would get angry. Another example is when Mrs. Breedlove was in hospital to deliver Pecola, she was examined by a white doctor and young white interns. The doctor has no hesitation in instructing his students in front of her, saying "now these here woman you don't have any trouble. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses." (p.125) She gets furious, and deliberately made her delivery exaggerated by screaming.

This invisibility was repeatedly referred to by senior black writers such as Richard Wright in *The Man Who Lived Underground* (1945), and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952). In *Invisible Man*, Ellison states that the problem is that whites do not see blacks as separate

individual people. They just see blacks as something they wrongly created in their imagination.[8] Then, how do the blacks survive in such a place where blacks are invisible or marginalized in such a white-centered framework?

2. How to participate in the American Dream

In the case of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the hero once studied in a state college for blacks on a scholarship awarded as a prize for winning a battle royal in which he was forced to join in to entertain a party for white people. He originally had a talent for making beautiful speeches, and he studied so hard cultivating his intelligence at the college. He never forgot to curry favor with his professors or sponsors by always thinking about what they would want him to do or say. Nonetheless, suddenly he is thrown out because he provokes the president's anger by an accident.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs. Breedlove became a live-in housekeeper after her husband, Cholly burned down their house. When she negotiates with shopkeepers as the housekeeper, she exhibits her justice and power using the name of the Fisher family (her master). But this ivory tower is at the expense of her own self and family. She cries "Crazy fool…my floor, mess…look what you… work…get on out…my floor, my floor…"(p.109) when Pecola spilled a pie in the Fishers' kitchen, but actually there is nothing that really belongs to her in Fishers' household. She has a house to work in, but she does not have the house as a home. She can not live her real life and she can not bring up her own children.

Concerning the dream to have a home, there is an interesting link with *them*[9] (1969) by Joyce Carol Oates even though she is white and the story is about whites. *them* is a story about a poor white family struggling through the depression of the 1930s, and the novel received the National Book Foundation Award in 1970. There follows a quote from a letter to the author from one of the main characters, Maureen Wendall:

> "I don't ask to turn into you but to see myself like this: living in a house out of the city, a ranch house of a colonial house, with fence around the back, a woman working in

[8] Ellison, Ralph. 1952. *Invisible Man.* The Modern Library. New York: Random House

[9] Oates, Joyce Carol. 1969. *them.* Edited by Keiko Beppu. *The Selected Works of Joyce Carol Oates III.* Kyoto/Tokyo: Rinsen Book Company. 1998.

the kitchen, wearing slacks maybe, a baby in his crib in the baby's room, thin white gauzy curtains, a bedroom for my husband and me, a window in the living-room looking out onto the lawn and the street and the house across the street. Every cell in my body aches for this! My eyes ache for it, the balls of my eyes in their sockets, hungry and aching for this, my God how I want that house and that man, whoever he is." (p.336)

The framework of a decent house and family resembles that of "Dick and Jane's house." It can be said that this is the ideal American middle-class life. Here in *them*, Maureen depicts herself "working in the kitchen," so it is clear that she does not yearn for the lifestyle as an aristocrat. However, even though she dreams of a husband and child, she does not care about "whoever he is." Actually her dream comes true later, and she gets a house just like she wanted, by marrying her evening college professor who had a wife and children. Behind her fanatic desire, she had enough reason to do this. Her family always had bitter battles between both husband- wife and parents-children, they were poor whites living in a slum, her mother was selfish, and her father was unemployed and was later murdered by someone. Wishing to get away from home, she began to save money earning it through prostitution, but her money was discovered by her mother's second husband. He was an alcoholic and mistakenly thought that she was always stealing his money, and he beat her up until she was severely injured. She grew up in a slum in Detroit and her life was actually very difficult. Because of the setting and era of the story, there are also many episodes or lines referring to "Negro"/ "niggers", and there always appear expressions like, "Aren't you glad you're not a nigger, at least? Jesus, how'd you like to be a nigger and sick on the top of it? I did that much for you at least, kid." (pp.343-344) Therefore, it is obvious that even though they are in quite a lower class as whites, blacks were still lower than them.

In the case of *The Bluest Eye*, all Pecola wants is to have blue eyes which means to be accepted and loved by people, so she does not care about materialistic fulfillment. Pauline says "my floor!" for the floor of a white family's kitchen, so in a sense she has a desire for material satisfaction. However, she does not have the concept of becoming the owner of the house in the real meaning. She is satisfied and proud of herself only through the feeling of being a member of a decent white family, as a housekeeper. Moreover, it is interesting that she does not yearn to have her own family and live in her own house. It is enough for her to be just a perfect

housekeeper and be a member of a white household. There is great difference between blacks and whites concerning the concept of the American Dream.

Morrison writes in her essay, "Young America" distinguished itself by, and understood itself to be, pressing toward a future of freedom, a kind of human dignity believed unprecedented in the world. A whole tradition of "universal" yearnings collapsed into that well-fondled phrase, "the American Dream."[10] Freedom, democracy, or chance etc, there are many words used to represent America with symbols like the Statue of Liberty or Dick and Jane. Whitman, when he composed poems to celebrate America, tried to illuminate not only the majority but also the minority. However, it was still a viewpoint from a feeling of superiority. Hughes tried to enlighten us about the invisible truth which was not in Whitman's American picture. The picture is true in a sense, but there is an invisible margin and there are marginalized people. Wright and Ellison and other black writers also tried proclaiming their existence to make whites see them and also to awaken their fellow black men. Oates tried to show the life of marginalized poor white men and poor white women. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison completely covered these gradations and deepened the analysis of the American dream and delved down to the deepest parts of those invisible areas to which no one had yet referred; black women and black children. After beginning with a perspective of the country, she leads her reader to a much closer and deeper view of the communities in the country. This point will be further elaborated on in the next chapter.

Chapter II. The Value System Inside the Black Community

Side by side with the invisibility of blacks in the framework of a white-centered country, the strongly fixed value system has another great impact in *The Bluest Eye*. Of course, the value system is also white-centered, but Morrison deals with this issue using not the whole country but inside the black community as the background. It is natural because the trigger for writing this story was her experience in her elementary school days, when she was astonished by her friend's implicit desire caused by the white-centered value system even though the friend herself was also black. She seems to have no intention to just blame white people as the accused, and she rather leads her reader to detect the responsibility of her fellow community

[10] Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House Inc. p. 33.

members. She had the main narrator of the story, Claudia, say, "it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town."(p.206) The country America has a hierarchy, and Morrison tells us the black community is also a hierarchical society. So this chapter focuses on how the white-centered value system erodes the black community, and how each character reacts to it under the categories of mulattos and blacks.

1. Black characters:

The appearance of the McTeer's house is old, cold, and green. In order to heat their stove, they often go to the railroad tracks and pick up pieces of coal. There are cracks in the windows of their house which they stuff with rags. Even though Claudia is only 8-years-old, she knows that they belong to a minority in both caste and class, and experience a "peripheral existence" (p.17) and she has already learned how to deal with the situation. In these ways, the McTeer family's social class or economic background is not so very different from the Breedlove family. Then what is the difference between the McTeer family and the Breedlove family?

Claudia and Frieda Mcteer have impulsive natures, they assert their beliefs rather than fawning upon others' fixed ideas. Claudia felt discomfort when she was given a blue-eyed Baby Doll because if she tried to take the role as a mother of the doll, it was so hard, sharp, and cold to hug or sleep with. However, she knew that all the other people believed that the doll was exactly what she wanted. So she was bewildered, frustrated, and tried to "examine it to see what it was that all the world say was lovable." (p.21) She broke the doll apart to discover why everyone says, "pretty" to the doll or white girls but not to her. When Claudia and Frieda see that Pecola is bullied by nasty boys, they fight against the boys without fear in a hand-to-hand battle, and then when they see Maureen harass Pecola, they join forces against her. Even though they are astonished by Maureen's devastating confidence in her own predominance, their self-esteem does not waver. They believe in their value standards, and their own worth, so they try to analyze and fight against the absurd value standards of beauty and justice. They do not like Saturdays because they feel miserable when they have to take a bath. They were still in love with themselves at that time. "We felt comfortable in our skins, admired our dirt, and could not understand this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural --- a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us." (p.74) This metaphor, that they "admired their dirt," is in perfect opposition to the cleanness fetishism of Geraldine and Soaphead Church (both of them are mulattos).

The appearance of the Breedloves' house, which was an abandoned store, produced an irritating and melancholic atmosphere, out of harmony with the neighborhood. Their poverty was unremarkable among other black families, but their ugliness was extreme. "It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question," (p.39) "Dealing with it each according to his way. Mrs. Breedlove handled hers as an actor does a prop: for support of a role she frequently imagined was hers --- martyrdom. Sammy used his as a weapon to cause others pain. Pecola hid behind hers." (p.39)

Mrs. Breedlove (Pauline) is a representative of ordinary black woman of those days, but in comparison with Mrs. McTeer, she is the type who does not have a positive image of her own original identity, and also failed to identify herself with sophisticated black people, or real white people. This is symbolized by her handicapped foot, chipped teeth, and the ill-suited urban-like make up and clothing, and, moreover, the reality that she herself is not really interested in urban fashions. She just wants to feel a sense of belonging to somewhere. She avoids facing reality in a constructive manner, but sustains herself by a warped satisfaction of worth as a person. She presumes she is not worthless but she is under an ordeal, and must withstand the misfortune to reflect her devotion for God. However, her faith is warped so she often needs to create artificial ordeals. When she first met with her husband, Cholly, he was the first person to accept her total personality, and even he frankly treated her handicapped foot as something to be admired. Those days were the only time when she experienced real happiness, but after they moved to an urban area, Cholly lost himself in the glitter of urban nights, and Pauline was abandoned by him, and marginalized by the sophisticated black people in the neighborhood. In order to earn their friendship, she frantically tries to behave similar to them regardless of her own tastes. When she got pregnant, she regained something of herself through her maternity and she believed she could have something real to love and devote herself to. However, her baby looked just like herself, it was natural. There was a great difference from the world of Hollywood films which was the only consolation in her life. She transferred the despair to her ordeal. Mrs. Breedlove often has severe scuffles with her husband, Cholly, about domestic trivial things, and only while fighting she felt her true self. While fighting she feels she is an upright Christian, in a sense, so she needs Cholly's sins. "Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." (p.127) Going to the church, and showing herself off as much more religious and ethical than the other people who

used to look down on her, she exhibited her status in the black community. Then she found her worth as a person in a white family's house as a housekeeper.

Regarding Pecola, Morrison responded in an interview with Robert Stepto in 1976, that she wanted to have her as a "total and complete victim of whatever was around her."[11] What did she mean by saying, "victim of whatever was around her?" Morrison's insight is in complete agreement with the psychologist Frantz Fanon's analysis: that his black patients' cases involving extreme inferiority complexes towards whites is ingrained in the society which needs an underdog to sustain its stability and superiority.[12] Morrison refers in a lecture that sometimes people creates pariahs to establish their identity as members of a community.[13]

2. Mulatto characters:

Maureen Peal is a "high-yellow dream girl" (p.62) who transfers to the elementary school in Lorain, and is as rich as the richest white girls, swaddled in comfort and care. She becomes the star of the school, and teachers treat her courteously, and boys never tease her, girls flatter her. One day Maureen happens to protect Pecola from some naughty boys who are bullying her. However, this is merely from her curiosity and caprice. Soon after she helped Pecola, she attacked Pecola just for kicks by saying the same thing as the nasty boys, "You saw your own daddy naked.", and "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (p.73) As is often the case with other novels or novelists, Morrison uses symbolism in selecting the names of the characters in *The Bluest Eye*. "Peal" means a sudden loud repeated sound of laughter or thunder. Until meeting Maureen, Frieda and Claudia had no concept that they are ugly or inferior to whites or mulattos or that it is shameful to see their father's naked body. In this sense, Maureen's entry into their life is like a peal of thunder, and her ridicule of them with the perfect assurance of being superior, though she is only an elementary school girl, causes great mortification to them. Besides the general description of the mulattos' beauty and sophisticated demeanor, Morrison's original descriptions of ordinary mulatto girls are seen in the text: "they don't have home towns, just places where they were born. But these girls soak up the juice of

[11] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 17.

[12] Fanon, Frantz. 1952. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press Inc., 1967. p.100.

[13] Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House Inc.

their home towns, and it never leaves them." (p.81) This description contrasts the unyielding earth under the black people. Nonetheless, Morrison does not seem to mean that mulattos are rooted[14] in the real meaning.

> They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do with the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. Wherever it erupts, this Funk, they wipe it away; where it crusts, they dissolve it; wherever it drips, flowers, or clings, they find it and fight it until it dies. They fight this battle all the way to the grave. (p.83)

This tendency of cleanliness-fetishism means self-negation of their roots, and this tendency is similarly seen in Geraldine's and Soaphead Church's case, but is completely opposite to the self-love of the McTeer sisters who love their skin and dirt. This identity as a mulatto apparently seems to sustain the mulatto character's self-esteem, but unfortunately, it undermines their humanity at the same time. This is clearly demonstrated in the parts about Geraldine and Soaphead Church.

Geraldine's family lives in a beautiful house with a well-kept garden and graceful furniture. Apparently, their domestic life is idealistic without a stain. However, Geraldine's most outstanding characteristic is her emptiness. She has been brought up with elaborate parental care. Maybe it was her parents' love, but it resulted in bleaching out her black blood. She is a woman gifted with both intelligence and beauty, but the only way for her to live is to be of use to a white man. Her life is to serve her parents, then her husband, then her husband's son, Junior, and dedicate herself to making the next generation as close to white society as possible. Her mission is to bleach their roots, and her son's roots. Her marriage is aimed at making a whiter child so that even though she actually has a son, it has nothing to do with whether she loves her husband and son or not. She does not have affection for her family or even herself,

[14] Morrison, Toni. 1984. "Rootedness: Ancestor as Foundation". *Black Women Writers (1950-80)*: A Critical Evaluation. ed., by Mari Evans. New York: Anchor Press.

and it is symbolized in her fetishism for cleanliness and hatred for any contact with human physiological functions. Since this mission is deeply imprinted in her, all her physical and mental actions are automatically directed to executing her mission. So she does not have any personal wishes nor even any awareness of her lack of wishes. So her life is apparently comfortable, but vacant and filled with resignation in the deep meaning. Their marriage was aimed at inheriting the white lineage. It is quite interesting and ironical that this family is the only one whose family name is not referred to in this novel. Their family is materially abundant, but essentially sterile. The expression, "they don't have home towns, just places where they were born," (p.81) symbolizes Geraldine's life itself.

Soaphead Church (Elihue Micah Whitcomb), though he is also a representative of the mulatto category, he was brought up under a morbid parental control which differs in meaning from Geraldine's because he is a male. His family had an ancestor who was from the English nobility. Since then they have regarded their mission to be one of maintaining that high class genealogy. They believed in "De Gabineau's hypothesis that all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it." (p.168) So his parents raise him up strictly to be British-like in both the physical and mental aspects, and eliminate any and every aspect which might suggest their roots going back to Africa. Especially, his father was a doctrinaire religious fanatic, and also the principal of a school famous for its severe corporal punishment. His mother died soon after his birth. His grades at school were high, but he did not understand in the real meaning except things which coincide with his own prejudices. While he bears a grudge against his father who rules over him using severe corporal punishment and ignoring his dignity, he grows up with a yearning for authority.

Morrison writes in an essay, "I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as "knowledge."[15] And her struggle to investigate the fixed idea always appears in her novels. In *The Bluest Eye*, all the characters are representative in showing us various ways of how the fixed value systems erode the black community, and its influence on each character to build or destroy one's self concept. This issue has already been taken up by senior black writers,

[15] Morrison, Toni. 1992. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House Inc. p.4.

but their analysis for the unreasonable value system fades out at the political level and man-centered society. In the *Invisible Man*, Ellison depicts the process in which the hero is under the control of his fellow men's (communist group) sweet words sometimes, but is tossed back and forth in the riot and wanted as an accused by the group when the group's policy changed. Morrison's outstanding point is that she digs into the familial environment to look into the problems of women and children. So the next chapter will focus on the parental influences on children.

Chapter III. The Parental Influences on children

Morrison's father was a welder in a shipyard and her family was poor, especially during the Great Depression. So the life of the Mcteer family in the novel is just like her own childhood. As Michael Awkward linked the Mcteer family with Nikki Giovanni's poem, "Nikki Rosa"[16] as an example to express Claudia's rejection of white evaluative standards to interpret black life, Morrison herself recalls her childhood as a happy memory. She recalls the scene of her parents on their way home, hand in hand after their farm work, or her mother going to bed with her father following his custom of taking a nap because he was doing three jobs during day and night.[17] And it is clear that she knows what will happen if she does not have such family ties. So this chapter analyzes how Morrison depicts the influence of the parental unit on each character in the novel.

When children get cold, Mrs. McTeer directs a volley of curses at them, or she misinterpret her daughters' attendance on Pecola when she had her first menstruation as doing nasty things, and hit them with a stick. Mrs. McTeer is far from the perfect or ideal mother. However, she lives honestly according to her beliefs based on her own value standards, so that her children do not feel uneasy concerning their lives or are distrustful. Even though they are sometimes scolded due to false accusations, they maintained their innocence because they trust in their mother's love. Claudia recollects the days when, "Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it – taste it – sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its

[16] Awkward, Michael. 1989. *Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Writing*. New York: Columbia University Press. pp. 65-66.
[17] Morrison, Toni. 1987. "The Site of Memory", *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. pp. 117-118.

base – everywhere in that house. So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die." (p.12)

As a woman and as a mother, Mrs. Breedlove (Pauline) is depicted as a perfect contrast to Mrs. Mcteer. The reason why she dwells upon her self-usefulness is that she has been abandoned three times in her life. She has not been brought up in circumstances like Geraldine (mulatto) who was always under parental control. However she was brought up with a feeling of being branded as worthless in her family. She was born as the ninth child among eleven children, and maybe it was a natural consequence that she does not have the chance to gain the attention of her family very much. When she seriously hurt her foot in an accident in her infancy, she was not treated properly, so that her foot never completely healed, and she can not work normally. It may be fortune in misfortune that there was no one in her life who mocks her way of walking, but everyone's handling her with kid gloves makes her feel marginalized and worthless. Since she does not want to think that the reason for her worthlessness is her personality, she presumes that the real cause stems from her injured foot. When she got married to Cholly and got pregnant, she regained something of herself through her maternity and she believed she could have something real to love and devote herself to. However, she fails in the end.

Morrison also gives an example of the influence of parents on their children in mulatto families. The reason for Soaphead Church's being a "misanthrope" (p.164) and having cleanliness fetishism stems from his father's control. His father rejected his innate nature. Since he has never been loved or accepted by his father, this caused his split personality. He has no confidence in himself. At the same time the fetishism indicates his denial of his own roots, so it thrusts him into self- denial. As a consequence, even though he can get good scores at school at first, he can not adjust to studying or to his job when it comes to the point when he must really specialize. However, he once had the chance to regain his humanity when he fell in love with an energetic lady, Velma, who gave him the maternal love he needed. Meanwhile he was eager to be rescued by her from his unnatural mental life. He was unable to discard his fetishism enough for Velma to be able to accept him. He is bowed down by loneliness and grief, but his father tries to build him up by forcing him to get a much higher academic status while criticizing Velma's genealogy. His humanistic mental balance was complexly upset, and he completely lost the energy to discover what to do by himself. At last, he is abandoned by his

father who was responsible for his indecisiveness and disabilities. The only thing left for him to do was to just keep on living by playing whatever role other people required of him.

I believe, Cholly will be the strongest example in showing the impact of parental neglect. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison vividly depicts the antagonism between blacks, whites and mulattos. However, we would do well not to regard Cholly as a representative of the black man's stereotype. The situation of parents not knowing how to face child rearing perhaps stems not a little from slavery. In the era of slavery, families are sold separately, or forced to propagate themselves regardless of their will like domestic animals. For a long time, black people had been deprived of the choice to live according to their own free will or fully develop their family ties. They were often deprived of the knowledge of where their parents or relatives were. Regarding this background, Cholly can be seen as a representative of this genealogy. In this novel, he seems to embody what it is like for a person to be abandoned by one's parents, and it is a universal issue rather than a difficulty found only among black people. His father ran away from his mother before his birth, and he was discarded on a rubbish heap within a few days of his birth by his mother. Cholly is the only one in this novel who was really deserted at birth. However, it is obvious and significant that his youth is depicted in a much more humanistic light in comparison with Pauline, Pecola, Geraldine, and Soaphead Church. It is because he was brought up with love and care by his great-aunt. Even though he was not satisfied with her old appearance and unsophisticated manners, he loved and thanked her. He was a loveable boy with healthy emotions and consideration for others. The reason why he really loved his grand-aunt, old Blue Jack, or temporarily his wife Pauline, his son Sammy, and his daughter Pecola was that he was not raised like Geraldine who was forced to deny her roots, or like Pauline who was always treated like an absentee, or like Soaphead Church who was physically disciplined to be a member of the elite as a descendant of nobility. He was raised with real love and care. However, his great-aunt's love was too different from both in aspects of age and sex to serve as a father figure. So he does not know how to handle his wife or children even though he loves them. His first experience in having his personality attacked was when he was having his first sexual experience watched by two white men pointing a gun at his back. To fight against white men who have guns would mean instant death, so in order to protect his life and self-esteem, he transferred his failure and impotence to hatred toward the witness, his first girl friend. However, he does not lose his control completely then, and he decides to visit his father who he believes will understand his situation and feelings. The hope that his father will

understand him narrowly sustained his personality even though he knows that his father left his mother before his birth. He is completely deprived of his self-control when he is rebuffed by his father when he visits him, and the father ignored him. And this leaves him "dangerously free."(p.159) Just following his mood to go, he kills people, behaves gently or violently to women, or sometimes allows himself to be henpecked by them. He has nothing to love, to be proud of, or to be afraid of, even the death of people around him or his own death is nothing to him. If a person has something or someone to love, protect, or to be afraid of, even though it may be a trifle, that person's behavior has limits in some ways, but Cholly has nothing at all. Morrison depicts this process carefully and vividly in great detail and proves that Cholly was far from an unnatural man. Cholly's longing and respect for his father is obvious in such descriptions as: "Cholly had always thought of his father was a giant of a man," "he was staring at a balding spot in his father's head, which he suddenly wanted to stroke." "He couldn't say, 'I'm your boy.' That sounded disrespectful."(pp.155-156) And that the fatal shock which destroys his personality resulting from his rejection by his father is embodied by the depiction of his incontinence. In *The Bluest Eye* all the main characters except the McTeer family are suppressed or marginalized by their parents in some ways, but Cholly is the only one who completely negated his existence. It is very suggestive and ironic that his family name is Breedlove, even though he does not know how to breed children or how to breed love. Occasionally he feels love for his wife and children, but the feeling of love for someone or need to protect someone reminds him of his first failure and impotence toward the white centered society. He himself is aware of his responsibility for his daughter's miserable life, and that triggers his frustration against his powerlessness. It is tragic that Pecola really wanted to be loved by her father however outrageous a man he is.

Pecola grows up always watching her parents' all-out battles, and she was too young and powerless to understand, or join in or stop them. Her parents are up to their ears in troubles, and have no capacity to think about their children. So she never had a full understanding of her value as their child or even its existence. So when she sees the battles between her parents, while her brother, Sammy eggs them on and joins in or sometimes just abandons them, Pecola is in a dilemma of overwhelming desire that one would kill the other, or she herself could die, and prays to God, "Please make me disappear." (p.45) On the other hand, her real wish is to get someone's attention and be loved by someone. Contrary to her wish, people paid attention to her only when they bully her, teasing her about her appearance. So she assumes all her misery stems from her ugliness, and tries

to figure out the reason for her ugliness by looking into a mirror for hours. Every night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. This attitude is in perfect contrast to Claudia's reaction to the blue-eyed Baby Doll. She was always desperate to find out how she can be loved by someone, and does not have any concept of her own opinions, her value standards, or her justice. So when Claudia asks Pecola if she would like some crackers she answers, "I don't care" (p.19) and when Claudia asks Pecola where she wants to go or what she wants to do, she answers, "I don't care. Anything you want." (p.26) However, when she had her first menstruation she asks Claudia and Frieda, "Is it true that I can have a baby now? How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" (p.32) This question is the fixed expression of Pecola, and she asks the same question to the three prostitutes who live in her neighborhood, "How come they all love you?" (p.53) Pecola drinks three quarts of milk just because she wants to see Shirley Temple's face on the cup wishing that she could be like Shirley. Pecola goes to Yacobowski's Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store to buy Mary Jane candies. For her, eating candies means eating blue eyes; through eating Mary Jane, she loves Mary Jane, and is becoming Mary Jane. Another meaning of Mary Jane is marijuana. Maybe this name symbolizes Pecola's illusion that she can only see while eating this candy.

It is obvious that the origin of the tragedy in *The Bluest Eye* stems from the white- centered system from the slavery period. However, the story does not project an image that all backs are unhappy because of whites. The title, and Pecola's wish to have blue eyes, represents not only her yearning for beauty, but her urgent prayer to be accepted and loved by someone. And this is the unvoiced wish of all the characters in the novel. Almost all the characters except the McTeer family members are neglected by their parents or are forced to have feelings of self denial. And the parental unit affects the building up of their self-concept in both good ways and bad ways. *The Bluest Eye* is a novel which deals with racial issues and at the same time it is a tragedy caused by the chain reactions of self-loathing stemming from parental influences. This idea makes this novel not merely a black novel but a universal novel. Then how do people sustain their self esteem while having feelings of self-loathing stemming from parental influences? The next chapter focuses on this. They expel their self-loathing out in the form of anger toward someone who acts as a mirror to reflect their alter ego.

Chapter IV. Anger Reactions on a Personal Level

Besides the invisibility of the blacks, the unreasonable value systems, and parental denial, anger, mirrors, and the images of a mask are also the key words in this novel. Morrison

mentions the image of mirrors in her interview with Charles Ruas,[18] and also about the image of a mask with Thomas LeClair,[19] both in 1981. All the people except Pecola get angry, and the scenes in which they express their anger are quite vividly described in this novel sometimes with positive meanings. When they get angry, they feel "a sense of being," (p.50) or they get angry when they see Pecola as a mirror, and feel danger for trying to sustain what they believe to be their self-esteem, but which is actually their mask. This chapter will focus on the structure of anger as expressed in this novel when compared to two other novels, *The Ugliest Pilgrim* (1971) by the white writer Doris Betts, and Ellison's *Invisible Man.*

Mrs. McTeer, Claudia, and Freda are nice characters in the novel, but they have short tempers, and that is what makes them attractive. The scenes in which Mrs. McTeer gets angry because she misunderstands her daughters' treatment at the time of Pecola's first menstruation are vividly described with the mixture of women's solidarity. Or when Mr. Henry sexually harasses Frieda, Mrs. McTeer's anger is displayed with humanistic comedy. They are living in a white-centered system nation, but they know they are accepted by their own black community and by their family. So they can release their anger when it comes to the point. The reason people get angry and express their anger is because they have confidence that they are worthy enough to be listened to. They get angry at anyone if they bully Pecola. However, on seeing that Pecola herself is just folding into herself and doing nothing, then they become irritated with her. While they grasp Pecola's grief, her pain antagonizes them and they "wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets." (p.73) This mental representation is parallel to the scene when Soaphead Church behaves towards Pecola (he is actually the only one who really understands what Pecola is thinking and wishing, but he deceives her because he does not want to face up to his powerlessness), and Cholly reacts to Pecola physically (he rapes her). The biggest difference is that Claudia wants Pecola to spit her misery out by herself. On the other hand, Soaphead Church and Cholly want to take their misery out on Pecola. Claudia and Frieda's anger stem from their self-love or self-affirmation and they believe these concepts should be equal among their folks. However other characters' anger spurts out when they feel,

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[18] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 97.

[19] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p.127.

"I'm not *that.*[20]" on seeing Pecola who is actually a part of their true selves, but does not fit their mask which they need to wear in order to sustain their identity. Claudia and Frieda are free of this mask because they love their true self, and it is symbolized in the line as, "we felt comfortable in our skins" (p.74) but not in masks.

In comparison with Claudia and Frieda's point of view, the scene in which black boys who are just as young and just as black as Pecola bully her by saying "Black e mo…" (p.65) has a very strong impact in this novel. As Morrison explains in the text, "It was their contempt for their own blackness," (p.65) they see Pecola as a mirror but assuming they are not black like her and sustain their own self-esteem. And this motif is repeated later when the adult people in the town are gossiping angrily about Pecola. They say "That dirty Nigger" (p.189) or "two ugly people doubling like that to make more ugly." (p.190) They know they themselves are black, but they want to sustain their self- confidence by feeling they are at least not the worst like her or better than her.

Moreover, the same anger stemming from self-loathing is seen in her mother, Pauline. Up to the middle part of the novel, she exhibits anger toward the unfair treatment by white people. For example, she gets angry with the first white woman she works for as a servant. The white woman orders her to divorce Cholly if she expects to receive any salary from her. Pauline gets angry with her, thinking it is ridiculous to do as this selfish white woman demands rather than remain with her black husband even though he is an alcoholic. She also gets angry with the white doctors when she is having her baby. Meanwhile, after she actually sees her baby, her daughter, Pecola is the mirror which confronts her with the hopeless reality of her life as a miserable black person. She can not accept herself with her original identity as a black, so she can not look her daughter straight in the eye who is, in fact, her alter ego. And later she loses her true self beneath the mask she assumes as an ideal servant for a white family and she completely rejects and neglects her own daughter Pecola by only caring for the daughter of the white family. This tendency towards self-loathing for being black is much keener in the case of mulattos.

For Geraldine, Pecola is completely the root of all evil, the "funkiness" which she has

[20] Taylor-Guthrie, Danille, ed. 1994. "The Pain of Being Black: An Interview with Toni Morrison". *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi., p. 255.

always been trying to expel from herself. See sees Pecola as a mirror and sees "The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between." (p.92) So forgetting her usual graceful mask, she vents her anger on Pecola with very strong words, "You nasty little black bitch." (p.92)

Soaphead Church, though he is also mulatto, is a person who really can painfully understand Pecola's lack of self-confidence, and her deep loneliness from not being loved or even accepted by anyone. For the first time in his life he feels he really wants to save her by a miracle, but this compassion when reflected in Pecola as a mirror, finally reveals the truth that he is just an impotent fraud. His feeling of shame and self-hate are soon transferred into a grudge against her, and the grudge soon transfers into insane self-complacency, his mask, that he is a saint chosen by God.

The motif of an ugly girl visiting a fake fortune teller is written in Doris Betts' *The Ugliest Pilgrim* which was published just two years after *The Bluest Eye*. The heroine, Violet, has big scar on her face, and it was a great problem for her. One day she watches a TV program which introduced a fortune teller who makes crippled people healthy. But when she visits the fortune teller, he behaves in a businesslike manner without any show of kindness, and preaches to her with words from the Bible to just make excuses for his fake miracle power. Until this point, the situation is exactly the same, except the heroine is black or white, with a problem about her looks. But in contrast with Pecola, Violet has experiences of being accepted or loved by her parents. After her parents' death, she was so lonely, and it was for that reason that she seriously began to look for someone to love her. And in order to be loved, she thought she needed to be rid of her scar, and if possible she wanted to have Irish-like hair and eyes. Similar to the same as Pecola's wish for blue eyes, Violet's wish to improve her looks does not come true. Nevertheless, her real deep-seated desire to be loved does come true. She fell in love with a man who seriously loves her since he met her on the way of her pilgrimage. Though she wanted to be a beautiful woman, she actually does not have to wear a mask. So the greatest difference between Violet and Pecola is that Violet can explode her anger outwards and vent it on the fortune teller. This she is able to do because she is at least white and is not only loved by her parents but also by her lover.

On the other hand, Pecola never gets angry. For Pecola, visiting Yacobowski's Fresh Veg.

Meat and Sundries Store. is a stressful ordeal for her, because she must face up to Mr. Yacobowski's absence of human recognition, and instead, his distaste for her. She is embarrassed and hurt by him, but she has nothing and nowhere to rid her of her feelings. Not only the white man, Mr. Yacobowski, but the black people see her as a mirror to see their alter ego, and they feel safe by confirming "I'm not like her" by saying "ugly" to her. So she identifies herself with the dandelions by the roadside which everyone says is, "worthless", but she loves its praiseworthiness. She tries to expel her pain in anger at the dandelions by saying, "They are weeds," (p.50) and "Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging." (p.50) All people tend to release their frustration on someone or something weaker than they are, just like the other characters' actions against Pecola. However, in Pecola's case, the dandelion is the only thing weaker than she is. She can't maintain her anger because she herself does not have confidence in her own ideas and opinions, and this is because she has never been accepted by anyone. So when she is encircled by school boys and hooted at, she has no idea what to do and just cries and hovers in the boys' circle. And then she is assailed by Maureen, and she just folds into herself and does nothing. And when she is raped by Cholly, she does not blame him directly. When Pecola visits Soaphead Church in the climax of the novel, again she never blames him for his deceit, but she believes in his fantasy.

This theme of rape by a father is formerly written about in Ellison's *Invisible Man*. The reason and the process of the rape are quite similarly outlined in *The Bluest Eye*. The father loves his daughter, he is drunk on the day the incident occurred, and the daughter looks and behaves quite similar to his wife before the rape. But the big difference is that the *Invisible Man* depicts the rape only from the viewpoint of the father. From his point of view, he does not understand why he is blamed for the rape while he was drunk and not fully aware of what he was doing. He regards himself as innocent. And the appearance of the mother and daughter's anger is described rather briefly without any concern as to the deep impact it had on them. Morrison seems to declare "No" at this point and that she was not satisfied with his man-centered view or merely a manly protest to the white-centered society or racial self-loathing in the *Invisible Man*. She enlightens the reader concerning the voiceless women or children who are deprived of the power even to get angry when faced by unreasonable treatment from others.

On dealing with Cholly's rapist role, Morrison's insight is much deeper and is much more careful than the author of the *Invisible Man*. She describes how Pecola's love for and expectations of Cholly were mistaken and resulted in accusations against his impotence and unreliability. That triggers his cruel rape with complex emotions of self-hate, self-rationalization, and pity for Pecola.

> "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she look so whipped? She was a child – unburdened – why wasn't she happy? The clear statement of her misery was an accusation. He wanted to break her neck – but – tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet. What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him – the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him?" (p.161)

His anger is similar to that of the other characters, partly because of his self-loathing when he sees Pecola as a mirror. It is at the same time symbolic that his evolution of anger is quite similarly seen in the scene when Claudia and Frieda are irritated by Pecola because they really care for her.

In these ways, all the characters in *The Bluest Eye* become angry in their own style, sometimes in positive ways and also in negative ways. They particularly exhibit their anger when they see Pecola as a mirror. A mirror is a thing which reflects someone or something. A mirror's value depends on the objects it reflects, but a mirror's own existence is a passive existence. As a result, Pecola herself sees herself in a mirror. Since she can not find a sense of being with anyone, she creates another self in her mirror. And for the first time, she talks in her true vice, including her anger towards Cholly or her other self. And, showing the reader the symbolic scene in which Pecola is talking to her mirror, Morrison seems to inspire her reader to look back on why this tragedy happened through the suggestive epilogue when Claudia looks back on the year 1941. She does not have any feeling of anger toward Pecola or Cholly or anybody else, and admits her responsibility for Pecola's tragedy. The epilogue is linked with the

prologue, "There is really nothing more to say --- except *why*. But since "why" is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how." (p.6) Morrison inspires her readers to think carefully why the tragedy happened, and also to find themselves and admit their responsibility in this story which acts as a mirror for them.

General Conclusion

The Bluest Eye is based on Morrison's unforgettable experience in her elementary school days when she was first introduced to the structure of racial self-loathing. Since her childhood, she had been thinking about the validity and vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted by other people. Morrison says in an interview with Thomas LeClair in 1981[21] that when she was writing *The Bluest Eye*, she was thinking about the fact that nobody treated these people seriously in literature and that "these people" who were not treated seriously were indeed herself. And in another interview with Claudia Tate in 1983[22], again she mentions this novel and says that she wrote it because it was the novel she herself wanted to read because no one had written it yet. So while following in the wake of her senior writers covering the universal theme of the quest for belonging or self-esteem, she advanced her own original analysis of the invisible marginalized areas of the white-centered American dream. She did not stop at the level of merely protesting against the whites, she delved into the area of responsibility within the black community. Furthermore, she declared the importance and necessity of family ties, no matter how severe the circumstances are concerning the land or community in which the people exist. Moreover, she tried to inspire her readers to reflect upon themselves using her novel as a mirror, and not just to feel pity or anger toward the tragedy as do the characters in the story. Thus, Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* manages to include her whole life-long passion to analyze the quest for self-esteem both in the community as a whole and from the point of view of the individual within the community even though it is her first novel. This is truly a great accomplishment.

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