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Responses to Shattered Masculinity in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

Much of the criticism on Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* has avoided the novel’s treatment of male characters in favor of more female-based critiques. This is neither surprising nor unwarranted, considering that black females’ internalization of white beauty standards is one of the main themes on which the text rests. However, while few will challenge the importance of such critical examinations of Claudia, Pecola, Pauline, and others, it is perhaps unexpected that more attention has not been paid to the text’s black male characters. This fact is even more unusual because of obvious patterns of maladaptive male behaviors in the novel, including but not limited to pedophilia and rape. Indeed, while black females in *The Bluest Eye* suffer from their internalization of white beauty standards, black males must confront the parallel challenge of emasculation by white society; and because the novel centers on an act of father-daughter rape – the ultimate expression of the emasculated male – the reader is forced to acknowledge the issue as a central theme of the text.

Throughout *The Bluest Eye*, black male characters are emasculated both systematically and personally by whites. Cholly’s inability to forge an economically stable life for his family is a form of systematic emasculation, as socioeconomic disparities are what prevent him from achieving the role of “provider” and “breadwinner” into which men typically ascend (note that Pauline is the main wage earner for the Breedloves) (114). Furthermore, the forced bourgeois “individualizing” of Junior and Soaphead Church is also emasculating, and is described by Morrison in masculine terms: Junior wants to play “King of the Mountain” with other black boys, to say “’Fuck you’,” “compare the sharpness of jackknives,” and “share with them the laurels of being able to pee far and long” (81).[[1]](#footnote-1) It is Geraldine’s aversion to raising a “nigger” child that deprives Junior of male camaraderie, his only playmate being the idle Ralph Nisensky. Of course, the most explicit example of black male emasculation in the text is the white men’s humiliation of Cholly during his first sexual encounter. The men are described with their “long guns” aimed at Cholly – a phallic symbol of their dominance – and they laugh mockingly as he fumbles impotently with Darlene (134). What is particularly interesting about this scene is its relevance to a long history of African-American emasculation, namely, of black man as “entertainment.” The white men’s asthmatic ‘hee hee hee-ing’ recalls the dominant culture’s reactions to Sambo and blackface minstrel shows, two of many examples of black males employed for the degrading amusement of whites (Darity 312). Thus, part of Morrison’s talent in *The Bluest Eye* is to craft dramatized instances of black male emasculation, without divorcing them from the larger social-historical context of racial oppression.

The effect of white society’s constant undermining of black masculinity in the novel is that black male characters must assert themselves through sexual possession of women. For as Cholly says after his humiliating sexual encounter, directing his anger at white men “would have destroyed him,” so he instead hates Darlene, “the one who bore witness to his failure, his *impotence* (emphasis added)” (137). This tendency for black males to redirect their hatred towards women is made fairly clear in the novel, but examined closely, it also seems to explain their more depraved sexual behaviors: Unable to perform adequately in conventional relationships, some men resort to acts of pedophilia and rape. Mr. Henry exemplifies this failure by both his need to consort with prostitutes and his reputation with the town’s women, as in their questioning why he has never been married and musing that perhaps somebody has “cut it off” (17). Besides being an explicit act of verbal castration, this passage and the women’s conclusion that he is “just picky” also cleverly foreshadow his later “picking” at Frieda (89). More significantly, however, black males’ sexual perversion in the novel is best exemplified by Soaphead Church. The text chronicles the damaging effects of his whitewashed education and upbringing, citing them as the root cause of his melancholy and neuroticism: The former ruins his marriage with Velma, and the latter leads him to prey on young girls (154, 151). One need look no further than the claim that Soaphead “did not experience sustained erections” for physical and symbolic evidence of his emasculation (151). Thus, having failed with women his own age, and being intimidated by young boys, female children provide the only remaining outlet by which he can assert his masculinity. This destructive progression from emasculation, to female rejection, to sexual perversion is what leads to Cholly’s climactic rape of Pecola.

Because *The Bluest Eye* centers on an act of father-daughter incest, the reader is forced to acknowledge black male emasculation as a central theme in the text. For it is clear that Cholly’s abuse of Pecola is the narrative focal point of the novel, as foreshadowed in the first two lines of its introduction (10). Essentially, Cholly’s rape of Pecola is the epitome of masculine failure: Aside from the sheer depravity of a grown man raping a child, he also fails as both a father and a husband. Several aspects of this scene link Cholly’s actions to a larger context of emasculation. From a marital standpoint, his failure as a husband underlies the entire passage, beginning with his lamentations about his marriage and culminating in his desire to “nibble away the itch from [Pecola’s] calf with his teeth,” as he once did to Pauline (146, 147). His shortcomings as a father are also highlighted, Cholly described as “dumbfounded” about childrearing and wondering, “What could he do for her [Pecola]… What give her? What say to her?” (147). One of the more interesting aspects of this passage is noted by Patrice Cormier-Hamilton, who draws a link between Cholly’s actions and the instruments of “systematic” emasculation discussed earlier. She notes, “he [Cholly] feels rage because he unconsciously senses that *economic disadvantages*… have contributed to the ‘permanent and unrelieved blow’ exhibited in her [Pecola’s] demeanor (emphasis added)” (119). Thus, Cholly’s rape of his daughter stems from his own perceived failure as a “man” (i.e. the man of the household), a position taken more explicitly by critics such as Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and others.[[2]](#footnote-2) Where this essay’s argument builds on other critics is in its assertion that Pecola’s rape highlights black emasculation as a central theme in the text. So central is the passage to the novel, its actions so encapsulating of the sexual, social, and familial ranges of emasculation, that it is unreasonable to focus on the novel’s treatment of women while marginalizing its men. Morrison gives implicit confirmation of this fact in her naming of the character Blue – appropriately, the “woman-killer” of Cholly’s childhood idolatry – which has perhaps been overlooked by critics in their deconstructive analyses of the novel’s title (138).[[3]](#footnote-3) The novel is as much a testament to black males’ struggles within the white culture as it is about women’s.

As noted earlier, to claim that *The Bluest Eye* foregrounds black male emasculation does not detract importance from critical examinations of the novel’s female characters. It would be unreasonable to assert that the struggle against white standards of beauty is not a significant theme in the text, or for that matter, the most significant theme of all. The point of focusing on the novel’s male characters is to highlight an aspect of the text that has largely been sidestepped by critics; and furthermore, the text rewards a close reading of these characters, as it is clear that they engage in comparable patterns of antisocial behavior. By placing Cholly’s rape of Pecola as the focal point in the novel, Morrison emphasizes these concerns by combining the sexual, social, and familial ranges of emasculation into a single representative image. Read in this way, *The Bluest Eye* opens up new discussions about black masculinity and gendered responses to white cultural oppression.

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1. Gurleen Grewal discusses black, middle-class “individuals” and Morrison’s “anti-*Bildung* projects” in her introduction to *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (5). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak views Pecola as a “scapegoat” for Cholly, an outlet for his disdain

   towards women and “his own self-hatred and fear of emasculation” (195). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chikwenye Ogunyemi comments on the characters’ “blueness” in *The Bluest Eye*, a pun on “the bluest ‘I’” (114); Cat Moses states, “*The Bluest Eye* is Claudia's *blues* for Pecola and her community (emphasis added)” (637). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)