

## A Critical Examination of Setting and Racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores issues of setting and racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The novelist used the medium of setting to unveil the underpinnings of racism and the devastating effects of the same on the psychology and being of African Americans in the years leading up to the Civil Rights era. While racism and racial relations are not new concepts, Toni Morrison used her characters to reveal the destructive effects of racism to draw society's attention to the plight of Pecola, who ultimately becomes a "loser of everything."

**Keywords:** Racism, setting, discrimination, African Americans, dehumanization, social construction, consequences, segregation.

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### Introduction and Background

*The Bluest Eye* is set in 1941, covering autumn, winter, and summer. The novel begins after the great depression when economic security was of particular concern for African Americans. Although African Americans have had a challenging existential experience in America, the great depression further complicated their experiences because, during that time, they had little privileges to move about, unlike the white, with unlimited freedom of movement. This social reality resulted in the constant migration of people from one place to another, as represented by the characters in the novel. The African Americans migrated from one place to another in search of jobs, creating room for the spatial setting of the work. For instance, when we get to Pauline's and Cholly's stories, we can see that they moved South to the Northern part of Ohio as part of the great migration of African — Americans from 1910 to 1940—the great migration period witnessed a mass exodus of African Americans from the rural southern towns to more industrial Northern areas, if not for any other thing, to have food on their tables.

However, it is ironic that when Pauline and Cholly arrived in the North, their lives did not necessarily change for the better due to joblessness. No doubt, such experience is one of the most critical aspects of the novel. In the North, the couple faced different problems from the disdainful whites and people who judged them based on their southern accents, differing values, and norms. At this point, the issue of racism comes to play, a situation where people are judged based on the color of their skin and not their character.

### Central Idea of *The Bluest Eye*

The *Bluest Eye* tells the story of little Pecola, who desires to become beautiful at all costs. This development results from her immediate environment where racism is practiced, where blacks do not have a significant place, recognition, and right in society. Pecola, a young black girl of about nineteen years, considers herself ugly as she lives in a society where "Whiteness" is the accepted criterion for beauty. She longed to have blue eyes at all costs, a critical marker of beauty. However, Pecola is not successful in attaining beauty, and not only that; she suffers mockery and all kinds of insults at school and other places because of her black color. The climax of Pecola's plight is her becoming pregnant for her biological father and consequently getting drowned in the waters of insanity, a miserable situation that is worse than death because, at death, emotional trauma is not felt. Considering this development, we submit that *The Bluest Eye* is written in a beautiful setting that justifies the mood, behavior, actions, and fate of the principal character, Pecola (4).

### Setting in *The Bluest Eye*

When we talk about the setting of a work of art, we talk about everything, for every aspect of a piece of literature is predicated upon the setting, whether geographical, spatial, emotional, cultural, sociological, or otherwise. M. H. Abraham stated that "the overall setting of a narrative or dramatic work is the general locale, historical time, and social circumstances in which its action occurs; the setting of a single episode or scene within the work is the particular physical location in which it takes place" (294). The setting is essential to the overall message of *The Bluest Eye*. For example, the school setting of the novel reveals Pecola's exposure to ridicule and the dehumanizing plight of being black, as Morrison tells us:

As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly... she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at

school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk... Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond... when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove, Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove" and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot and mock anger from the accused. (34)

The above excerpt reflects the true picture of what the setting brings upon Pecola as she navigates the isolated world of the classroom setting, where discrimination, segregation, racism, and prejudice reign. Morrison aptly paints a picture where Pecola is almost diminished as a human in the face of other students and even teachers. The excerpt equally justifies the submission of the writers' of Hubpages concerning the spatial setting of the work:

The place is the real background of racial discrimination and sufferings of the African Americans of those periods. The white-dominated society suppressed the minority blacks and made them deprived of every human rights. Blacks of the society, because of their appearance, suffered humiliations and insults. The place was a place of white domination where the blacks were segregated in schools, employment and other sectors of the society. (6)

Beyond the school setting is the house of the Breedloves, where fighting and quarreling are the order of the day as a result of the hostile nature of the environment that does not speak well of the blacks but instead brings out the beast in humans. The African American society offers no job opportunities to the blacks; no wonder Cholly could not provide for the needs of the house. The place they live is also a product of racism, as the author reveals: "The Breedloves did not live in a storefront because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant. They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly" (28). The poverty of the Breedloves and how their immediate environment treats them resulted in Cholly's inability to carry out his responsibilities as the head of the family. As we know, one's environment influences one's actions, inactions, and behavior. This observation can be justified through the character of Cholly, whose drinking habit could not help matters at home. This development arose from his inability to find meaningful employment, leading to constant quarrel and fight at home. This time, his inability to provide his wife with money to buy coal after being intoxicated with strong drinks is described thus:

Even from where Pecola lay, she could smell Cholly's whiskey. The noises in the kitchen became louder and less hollow. Mrs. Breedlove came swiftly into the room and stood at the foot of the bed where Cholly lay. "I need some coal in this house". Cholly did not move. "hear me?" Mrs. Breedlove jabbed Cholly's foot. "I said I need some coal". It's as cold as witch's tit in this house. Your whiskey ass wouldn't feel hell fire. "Leave me alone". Not until you get me some coal. If working like a mule don't give me the right to be warm, what am I doing it for? You sure aren't bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we'd all be dead. (50)

The above argument continued and later resulted in physical combat. Attributing such development to Cholly's drinking habit, Morrison states: "An escapade of drunkenness, no matter how routine, had its ceremonial does. The tiny, and undistinguished days that Mrs. Breedlove lived were identified, grouped and classed by these quarrels" (30-31). She reveals that:

Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking... Mrs. Breedlove sneezed... she ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face. He sat up, choking and spitting; naked and ashamed, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. (32)

As made evident above, the husband and wife are always idle because society makes no provision for work for them; if they have something meaningful to do, they would not have had the time to sit back at home to quarrel and fight each other for no just reason.

Furthermore, we discover that the bitter experiences of Mrs. Breedlove as the weak sex result from her environment. This environment does not have a positive plan for women. That is why Amanda Putnam asserts that:

Black female characters within Toni Morrison's novel are often scared physically and/or emotionally by the oppressive environments around them. Racially exploited, sexually violated

and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, these women often learn to coexist with their visible and invisible scars by making choices that are not easily understood. Specially, many of Morrison's female characters turn to violence-sometimes verbal but more frequently physical and in doing so, attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. (26)

To that end, we appreciate the rationale behind Mrs. Breedlove's ability and attempt to fight back and return Cholly's blows, especially as the wife sees him as a man who cannot cater to the needs of his household. We will recall that Cholly's inability to fend for his family is a result of the unfavorable environment he finds himself, a society, and a situation where the blacks are kept "out doors," which Mrs. Breedlove describes to her children during her announcement of the coming of Pecola to her house in the following light:

There is a difference between being "put out" and being "outdoors". If you are putout, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garments. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with — probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter — like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. (11)

This is yet another revelation of the bleak existence of the black in a racially segregated society. Amanda Putnam pointed out that: "Their community at large has accepted white (and light) skin as beautiful and thus has negated beauty in black (darker) skin" (28). Such negation no doubt has a devastating effect on the psyche of the black-skinned characters in the novel, especially the female ones. Putnam observes, "The girls, living in this oppressive reality, must either accept the emotional violence forced on them, believing in their ugliness or fight back as aggressively as possible to maintain a positive self-image" (28).

### **Racism and Its Impact on Characters**

Pecola believes in the socially constructed notion of ugliness as her existential condition. She believes she is ugly and does not wish to remain the same based on her bitter experiences at school and the larger society, which made her adore, appreciate, and demand blue eyes from Soaphead. This request baffled the man that he wondered: "Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty.. A little black girl who wanted to rise out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (138). Pecola's dehumanized state in an environment such as the one created in the novel devastates her. Whatever made her demand for blue eyes is psychologically and emotionally devastating. On the other hand, Claudia, who has a hatred for white standards, equally shares in the psychological and emotional breakdown that society has brought upon her and the rest of the black race.

Reacting to how Frieda and Pecola had a loving conversation about how cute Shirley Temple was, Claudia objects with annoyance: "I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles who was my friend, my uncle, my daddy and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chucking with me" (13). As we know, anger has a psychological effect and message it transmits to the human mind and the entire body, which Claudia suffers, thereby pointing to discrimination in work.

Again, Claudia's hatred for white Dolls is worthy of mention, which she describes as "a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding... all the world had agreed that a blue eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured... I could not love it, but I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable... A mere metal roundness" (13-14). The demands and likes of society are not fashionable and desirable to Claudia, a situation that keeps her in confusion, wonder, and sadness, thereby hurting her psyche. Amanda Putnam observed this and submitted that: "Claudia disrupts the obsessive desire to worship white/light attributes, rejecting them for her own blackness. She rebels against white oppression forcing others to see her not a reflection of witness" (27). Indeed, rebelliousness affects human existence, which cannot be over-emphasized.

Another significant aspect of the novel's setting is the curbside, on the girls' way back from school. This setting is significant because it marks one of the initial physical combat and exchange of blows across races. Remarkably, on their way back from school, a heated argument ensued over the black color of Claudia's father's skin, as revealed in the dialogue below:

What do I care about her old black daddy? Asked Maureen.  
"Black? Who you calling black?"  
"You I"

"You think you so cute!" I swing at her and missed, hitting Pecola in the face. Furious at my clumsiness, I threw my note at her, but it caught her in the small of her velvet back, for she had turned and was flying across the street... Safe on the other side, she screamed at us, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e Mos. I am cute! "The weight of her remark stunned us, and it was a second or two before Frieda and I collected ourselves enough to shout, six-finger- dog-tooth-meringue Pie! (56-57)

The excerpt shows that instead of humans seeing their fellows as partners in progress and having a team spirit for collective success, they see them as competitors, which creates room for distrust and unnecessary rivalry. Jerome Bump has critically described Claudia's hitting of Pecola instead of the target Maureen as significant. To him, "Claudia ended up focusing her shame-driven anger on the scapegoat, Pecola" (151), who "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing." Her pain antagonized me; I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hundred and curving spine, force her to stand erect, and spit the misery out on the streets (57). Following Claudia's reactions after she hit Pecola, one can describe the action as a miscalculated effort or attempt to fight racism.

Furthermore, the novel reveals that the same racial society that forces the girls to attack each other is the same that makes Cholly attack Pecola and other members of his household. The African American society created in the novel is one where people rise against the weak or lesser ones. Jerome Bump observes this when he states:

When Cholly was shamed, "never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters, such an emotion has destroyed him. They were big, white armed men (150-51). Instead, when he grew up, Cholly turned his furry on "petty things and weak people" (38), especially Pecola and other members of his own family. (153)

Jerome Bump also pointed out that "anger and hatred are not enough to fight racism, not only because they often miss their targets but also because they are secondary emotions, driven in turn and shame" (152). This means that the victims of racism at work do not know how to direct their fight against racism since they have discovered the source of their problem. For instance, Claudia once noted during the conversation with Pecola after their encounter with Maureen that: "All the time we known that Maureen Pearl was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The thing to fear was the thing that made her beautiful and not us" (58). Following the above expression, Jerome Bump concludes, "The problem is that the girls, like many readers, do not know how to direct their anger at the 'thing'. What is the thing? I would suggest it is judging by appearance, and Morrison focuses on ugliness to enable white readers feel something of what it is like to be judged by racial hierarchies of skin colour and the master and family narratives that reinforce them" (152-3).

More critical, also, is the home setting of the Breedlove. We will recall that Cholly's household does not speak well of the existence of its members, who are in constant fear of abandonment. Jerome Bump has pointed out that 'the fear of being abandoned that pervades the novel also surfaces in Pauline's feeling that because of her club foot, she never felt at home anywhere or that she belonged any place" (156). This also points to the height of racial discrimination in African American society, where a mere stigma makes the entire people see the victim as an object of ridicule. This development points to the insensitive nature and vision of the white race, which put the Blacks in fear. Bump describes this development as "an instinctive primordial fear that because we have a stigma if we do not look like "them" or do not belong for some other reasons, we will be driven from the group" (156). Pecola is stigmatized because society, including the family members, sees her as ugly. Bump aptly describes this situation when he says, "When a little chick is born with a spot of blood on it, for example, the hens will often peck it to death. We find out that owing to Pecola's ugliness, as described in the novel, adults in her community conclude that she would "be better off in the ground" (156). Brooks Bouson made a similar observation when he said that "Pecola is a victim not only of racial shaming but also of her cripple and crippling family" (217), which implies that beyond the larger society, there is the challenge that confronts Pecola from the members of her immediate household. In his view, Coffman Ervin describes Pecola's stigma as "the bodily stigmas of ugliness and femininity and the tribal stigma of being an African American" (19).

### **Broken and Battered By Society**

Given her experiences and what she had been through, Pecola tried hard to belong and to be accepted in a social system that cared less about her being and existence. In the family, Pecola becomes the scapegoat because "if she looked different and beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they say, why look at pretty-eyed Pocola; we mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (46). However, they did because Pecola is not pretty. Yancey has observed that: "Pecola firmly believes that she is responsible for the irascible and violent behaviour of her parents... she knows herself as a problem. This knowledge causes her

to wish for her own disappearance as we hear her utter her mind: “God,” she whispered into the palm of her hand, please let me disappear” (45). We find a similar development in Fanon Frantz’s *Black Skin White Mask* when the narrator states:

I am the slave not of an ‘idea’ that others have of me but of my appearance... already I am being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes. I am freed. Having adjusted their microtones, they objectively cut away slice of my reality. I am laid bare... I slip into corners, I remain silent, I strive for anonymity, for invisibility. (116)

Pecola’s wish to disappear can be likened to the voice that strives for invisibility in the above excerpt. Worthy of mention about the setting of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* again is the small grocery store located at Garden Avenue where Pecola went to buy candies. Her experience at the store and at the hands of the storekeeper marks the genesis of what the African American society has in stock for her and the rest of the black race. Such experiences and encounters mark one of her traumatized states of mind, existence, and being. Morrison tells us that as she pulls off her shoes and takes out the three pennies:

The gray head of Mr. Yacobowski comes up over the counters. He urges his eyes out of his thought to encounter her Blue eyes... he looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and objective between vision and view, his eyes drawback, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste that effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him, there is nothing to see... Pecola unfolds her fist, showing the three pennies. He scoots three MaryJanes to her — three yellow rectangles in each packet. She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She does not know how to move the finger to her right from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand. Finally he reaches over and takes the pennies from her hand. His nails graze her damp palm. (36-37)

What do we expect of a young girl subjected to such insult and humiliation, if not an emotional breakdown? The old storekeeper avoids her just as people avoid poisonous substances just because of her skin color. In fact, the Grocery store experience is an eye-opener to the racial boundary between whites and blacks. No doubt, it is the blacks that suffer its consequence emotionally, psychologically, and otherwise. Pecola is a typical example of the victims of racism and color bars.

The relocation was especially comfortable to Pauline, who “s old enough to leave school. Mrs. Williams got a job, cleaning and cooking for a white minister on the other side of town and Pauline, now the oldest girl at home took over the care of the house. She kept the fence in repair, pulling the pointed states erect, securing them with bits of wire, collected eggs, swept, cooked, washed and minded the two younger children—a pair of twins called chicken pie who were still in school. She was not only good at housekeeping, she enjoyed it. (87-88)

Of course, Pauline has no option but to enjoy her job just like everyone else. However, one watches and reads in dismay how a full-fledged woman can be subjected to such humiliating jobs, and this is where we frown at racism the more. While society and skin color keep white people at the top, blacks are subdued and relegated to the background. Of a truth, if not for the sake of racial discrimination and the hostile nature of the African American society that does not accommodate and favor the blacks, the women in the above excerpt would not have picked up such jobs. The only jobs available for the blacks are menial and unskilled ones. Little wonder black women are always seen moving from one place to another in search of such jobs. Morrison says of Pauline: “After several months of doing day work, she took a steady job in the home of a family of slender and means nervous, pretentious ways” (92). It is at this place of work that Cholly comes to demand money from her wife while drunk, a development that denies Pauline her job, as revealed thus:

He came there drunk wanting some money. When that white woman see him, she turned red... she told Cholly to get out or she would call the police... I don’t want no dealings with the police. So I took my things and left. I tried to get back, but she didn’t want me no more if I was going to stay with Cholly, She said she would let me stay if I left him. (93)

In light of the above expressions, one may describe the decision of Pauline’s employer as irrational and rash because Pauline was not caught in the act of drunkenness, nor was she found wanting in the discharge of her duties as an employee. Besides, there are white people, especially men, who commit more serious crimes than mere drinking, yet they are not denied of better living, and neither are they punished for their crimes. Take, for example, the story told by Blue Jack “about how a white man cut off his wife’s head and buried her in the swamp and the headless body came out at night and went stumbling around the yard, knocking over stuff

because it couldn't see, and crying all the time for a comb" (104). Objectively, the story did not provide us with the consequences of Whiteman's action concerning the punishment for such sacrilege.

Another point to justify one's argument that Pauline was driven out of a job as a result of hatred against the blacks and not just for Cholly's visit and drinking habit is the woman's refusal to pay her for the services she has rendered already; Pauline herself puts it thus:

The gas man had cut the gas off, and I couldn't cook none. I really begged that woman for my money. I went to see her. She was mad as a wet hen. Kept on telling me I owed her for uniforms and some old broken-down bed she give me... I needed money. She wouldn't let up none, neither, even when I give her my word that Cholly wouldn't come back there no more. Then I got so desperate I asked her if she would loan it to me. She was quiet for a spell... I seen she didn't understand that all I needed from her was my eleven dollars to pay the gas man... Are you going to leave Him, Pauline? Only when you leave him. (94)

Pauline's bold stand and wise contemplation in the above quotation are highly appreciated because, despite the pressure mounted on her, she thought and concluded within herself not to leave her husband because of a job. As we hear her speak: "it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman" (93).

However, it is ironic and unfortunate to discover that a man like Cholly, who was once recorded to have started well, would later fall to the point of becoming a drunk as a result of the hostile environment he finds himself in, an environment where racism and joblessness are at their peak. Pauline made this confession herself when she confessed, "Me and Cholly was getting along good then. We came up north; supposed to be more jobs... Cholly was working at the steel Plant and everything was looking good. I didn't know what all happened everything changed" (19). These lines show no social order and good steady work for the blacks. As things have changed in the Northern part of society, Cholly's behavior changed too. At this point, we can attribute Cholly's misconduct and drinking habit to the white society that could not accommodate him. Had it been that society well organized to accommodate everybody regardless of race and color constantly, Cholly would have remained gainfully employed and would not have had time to drink in a stupor, which lured him into the sexual act with his biological daughter, as revealed in the following passage:

It was a Saturday afternoon, in the thin light of spring, he staggered home reeling drunk and saw his daughter in the kitchen... she was washing dishes... The tenderness welled up in him, and he sank to his knees, his eyes on the foot of his daughter... He closed his eyes, letting his finger dig into her waist... The confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the going of a wild and forbidden thing excited him... Surrounding all of his lust was a border of politeness. He wanted to fuck her- tenderly. But the tenderness would not hold. The tightness of her vagina was more than he could bear... the gigantic thrust he made into her then provoked the only sound she made... following he disintegration- the falling away of sexual desire he was conscious of her wet, soapy hands on his wrists ... removing himself from her was so painful to him he cut it short and snatched his genitals out of the dry harbor of her vagina. She appeared to have fainted. Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties. (127-9)

### **Conclusion**

The consequences of racism and living in a racially segregated society are detrimental to our collective humanity and consciousness. The Breedloves are ruined as a result of racism. Morrison reveals that "the years folded up like pocket handkerchiefs. Sammy left town long ago; Cholly died in the workhouse; Mrs. Breedlove still does housework (no improvement for the blacks); Pecola is somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved on the edge of town where you can see her even now once in a while... she however stepped into madness, a madness which protected her from us simply because it bored us in the end" (162-3).

It is a tragic tale, just as Jerome Bump points out that *The Bluest Eye* is modeled on classical Attic tragedies in which "an ugly or deformed person was chosen to take upon himself all the evils which afflicted the community and then was sexually abused and killed" (241). As such, *The Bluest Eye* is a tragic text *par excellence* because there is the constant purgation of fear, especially in the lives of the victims of racism.

The fear that is caused or generated by judging ourselves and others by appearance cannot be over-emphasized, as shown in the novel; no wonder Sartre observes that "human relations revolve around the experience of Look" (28), a development Bump condemns by saying that "This is one of those embarrassing facts of life, even more taboo to talk about than incest (154). This is because outward appearance does not depict reality and this is exactly why Bump makes reference to the biblical prophecy about the outward appearance of Jesus Christ and enjoins us to: "Compare, for example, images of Jesus in our culture with Isaiah's famous prophecy "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire

him, we hid as it were our faces from him” (154). Ironically, the same Jesus described in the light of this prophecy was the one that brought salvation to the world. Little wonder Bump states that “if readers of *The Bluest Eye* were familiar with images of an ugly Jesus perhaps they could imagine even Pecola as a Christ figure; after all, she too “is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” and cut off out of the land of the living” (154). A good understanding of these developments shows that Bump totally condemns racism and brutality in America. Society rejected and condemned Pecola; who knows if she would have been the Messiah?

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