

An Interpretation of Unhealed Trauma of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Abstract: Toni Morrison is one of the most representative writers in the third “black wave” in the United States, and the only black female writer in American history who has won the Nobel Prize in Literature. *The Bluest Eye* is her debut, published in 1970. It not only shows the trauma suffered by black race, but also reflects the future of black race. Pecola, the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, grew up in trauma, and she eventually failed to heal the trauma. The novel is a true representation of the life situation of black people. This thesis attempts to analyze the trauma suffered by Pecola from the perspective of trauma theory and the reasons for the failure of the final trauma recovery. Black and white discrimination, the absence of paternal and maternal love, and the collapse of beliefs are three causes of Pecola’s trauma. These three traumas made her lose herself. In the process of repairing the trauma, she also suffered three failures: the failure to establish a new relationship with the outside world, the failure to narrate the traumatic experience, and the failure to reinvent herself through faith. At the end of the novel, these unhealed traumas of Pecola tell us that black women can only repair the trauma and find their true selves if they face the trauma squarely, maintain the black cultural tradition, and accept the white culture critically.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; Pecola; Unhealed Trauma; Trauma Theory

Introduction

Toni Morrison’s first work, *The Bluest Eye*, shows the black women's world under the white culture’s erosion with ingenious conception, through the trauma to heroine Pecola, it reflects the black’s values and the distorted tragedy of the soul under the strong cultural impact of the white, and reflects the traumatic history of the African Americans. It is a work of great research value. This paper will analyze *The Bluest Eye* from the perspective of trauma to show that the heroine Pecola can not heal the trauma ultimately.

1. Introduction to Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* and Trauma Theory

1.1 Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison (February 18, 1931 – August 5, 2019) was an American novelist. The critically acclaimed *Song of Solomon* (1977) brought her national attention and won the National Book Critics Circle Award. Morrison is the first black woman writer to win the Nobel Prize in the history of literature. Toni Morrison is one of the most representative writers in the third “black wave” in America. She is a contemporary American black female writer. Since 1970, she has written several novels, such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977). Morrison’s works fully reproduce the real life scenes of American black people with exquisite writing and vivid story plots. Black people’s self-pursuit of their own cultural traditions is an important theme in Morrison’s novels. Morrison’s main achievement lies in her novels. In her 60-year career, Morrison has written 11 novels, 5 children’s books, 2 plays, a set of songs and an opera. In 1993, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature for considering to be full of rich imagination and poetic expression.

1.2 *The Bluest Eye*

The Bluest Eye, published in 1970, is the first novel written by Toni Morrison. The novel takes place in Lorain, Ohio (Morrison's hometown), and tells the story of a young African-American girl named Pecola who grew up following

the Great Depression. Set in 1941, the story is about how she is consistently regarded as "ugly" due to her mannerisms and dark skin. As a result, she develops an inferiority complex, which fuels her desire for the blue eyes she equates with "whiteness".

The Bluest Eye is a tragic story of a little black girl. The novel describes the protagonist Pecola Breedlove's experiences of abuse and pain. Pecola was an 11-year-old black girl. Set in 1940, the novel was narrated by another black girl, Claudia, who was two years younger than Pecola and Pecola's only friend. At a time when white culture was dominant, she found herself looked down upon at school by her classmates and alienated from her neighbors. She realized that she did not exist in the eyes of the white shopkeeper. Pecola's mother, Pauline, went to work as a maid in a neat white household. Her mother gave Pecola not maternal love but domestic violence and indifference. Pecola blamed all her pain on her ugliness and lack of blue eyes. She believes that if her skin is white and her eyes are blue, then her life will be better. She used blue eyes as a symbol of white people. While her mother was busy taking care of a white family, her father, Cholly Breedlove, was addicted to alcohol. Nor did he give Pecola the care and support she needed. But it was he who gave Pecola the fatal wound. One spring afternoon, Cholly came home from drinking and raped Pecola. She was alone with her father. Pecola was pregnant when her father raped her again. As a result, she was expelled from school. Physically and psychologically damaged, Pecola grew eager to escape the terrible reality. So she visited saphead priest. She asked the chaplain for a pair of blue eyes. The priest said he could help Pecola fulfill her wish, but only if Pecola completed a mission for him. Soapy had long wanted to get rid of a sick dog. Then he gave Pecola a piece of poisonous meat and told Pecola to give it to the dog. He cheated Pecola. That was the only way to get what she wanted. Pecola lost her ability to integrate into society when she saw the dogs struggling and eventually dying after eating the poisonous meat. This eventually pushed her into abyss.

1.3 Trauma Theory

Trauma refers not only to physical injury, but also to psychological injury. The pathological study of trauma began with the study of hysteria in the 19th century, but at that time, more attention was paid to the external manifestations of symptoms, such as: slow response, loss of feeling. In 1893, Sigmund Freud put forward some views on the study of hysteria at that time, and he thought that the emergence of this symptom is also due to suffering from various traumatic memories. He believed that all kinds of symptoms are caused by "traumatic memory rather than traumatic events themselves, and physical symptoms are riddle like signs of traumatic memory hidden in the heart" (Freud, 1923:28). At this stage, more and more people choose to recount the events that happened to them to achieve the purpose of catharsis.

After the first World War, the trauma theory became more prosperous in Britain and America. At this time, the research focuses on the treatment of combat psychosis caused by war. At this time, psychologist Freud began to analyze the trauma of war and violence from the perspective of psychology. From the psychological point of view, Freud proposed that trauma is a kind of lasting painful reaction formed by the trauma situation acting on the trauma subject through conditional filtering and selection. He creatively proposed the delay and repetition of traumatic experiences in individual psychological responses, which laid a foundation for the later study of trauma from the literary perspective.

And according to Kathy Cruise, trauma is "a very unusual experience that someone has of a sudden or catastrophic event and it causes a delay in the normal immediate response to a catastrophic event" (Cruise, 2010:26). After Cruise applied the trauma theory to literary research, more and more scholars combined the trauma theory with the humanities, thus forming many empirical conclusions on the trauma theory in the psychological category.

2. Analysis of Pecola's Trauma

This part analyzes Pecola's trauma, including the causes of Pecola's trauma, the symptoms of Pecola's trauma, and her efforts to heal the trauma.

2.1 Causes for Pecola's Trauma

Because Pecola was a black girl, she suffered many traumatic events, including racial discrimination by white people, neglected by the black community and injuries from her family, which all contributed to the formation of her trauma.

2.1.1 Racial Discrimination from White People

In the story, blacks have always lived in the shadow of mainstream cultural values of the white. Black young people living under such abnormal evaluation criteria do not see their own advantages, and may even lose themselves in the process of blindly approaching white culture. Pecola seems to be the embodiment of misfortune and tragedy. While other white children enjoyed a good living environment, the 11-year-old girl had to leave the fence and live a life of nowhere because of the fire of her father. The pain she suffered when she was young did not make her stronger, but prompted her step by step to the edge of black culture. Pecola herself, her parents and brothers, and even those around her were convinced of the concept of white is beauty, and in such a life that is blatantly oppressed by white culture, she also increasingly feel that the unfair treatment that she have suffered is taken for granted. It all comes from black skin and ugly appearance. White people avoided black people like avoiding flies. Such discrimination from white society made Pecola realize that she would never be accepted by white society.

2.1.2 Abandonment by Black Community

“Nigger, nigger, your father sleeps naked. Nigger, nigger, your father sleeps naked” (Morrison, 1990:81). A group of black children, with Pecola in the center, laughed at her with all their might, and made up a song, and clapped their hands and sang it.

Pecola was discriminated against not only by whites, but also by other blacks in the black world who thought they were superior to her. White people imperceptibly conveyed the values of “white supremacy”. The idea was that whites are superior, both economically and racially. The idea of “white supremacy” was ingrained in black minds. In the presence of white people, even white children, an adult black man would feel humbled and dejected. But inside, the Negro felt humiliated and unjust. The resentment long hidden in the heart always needs a way to vent, so in the black community, blacks with good material foundation also began to choose to be close to the white lifestyle, while alienating and even discriminating against other poor blacks.

2.1.3 Injuries from Her Family

Pecola’s mother, Pauline, contributed to Pecola’s trauma. For Pauline, the spice of life might be her habitual quarrel with Cholly. It seems that without these arguments, life would lose the motivation to move forward. In such a quarrel, the ordinary life was a little better, if anyone wanted to deprive her of the right to quarrel, Pauline would not bear it. Pauline kept showing Pecola that Cholly was nothing, warning Pecola that she could not be like her father. Day after day of arguments with Cholly made Pecola never feel the warmth of home. Whenever the parents quarreled and fight, Pecola would be small curled up in bed, afraid to make a sound, even a small sneeze did not dare to hit.

Cholly was the victim because he was abandoned by his parents, bullied by whites and ignored by his peers, but Cholly was also an abuser. He never cared about Pecola, never tried to understand her. Cholly had never felt fatherly love since he was a child. He did not even know who his own father was. This lack of fatherly love led Cholly to have no idea how to take care of the children and deal with the father-daughter relationship. He longed to love Pecola, but he did not know her pain, nor what he should do for her. So in the midst of this conflict, he raped Pecola, pushing Pecola into the abyss. Cholly raped Pecola more than once, until she became pregnant, and the death of the even poorer child was the last straw. And his father became the ultimate executioner.

2.2 Pecola’s Traumatic Symptoms

Kathy Robert Kraus thinks that trauma is an injury, but it is a kind of the invisible injury, and trauma often has a lag. Because of the hysteresis, it leads to a similar scenario and remembered past trauma, he would also be subjected to secondary injury. “Events are not fully integrated when they occur, and one day they will return precisely and unchanged” (Freud, 1984:47). In 1980 American psychiatrists called the phenomenon “post-traumatic stress disorder”(PTSD). Pecola also developed symptoms of PTSD after suffering from family and racial trauma.

2.2.1 Sense of Helplessness and Isolation

Trauma researchers believe that victims of severe trauma deliberately numb themselves and shut themselves off in isolation in order to escape the painful experience. Pecola's uncharacteristic calm in the face of racial discrimination by whites, ostracism from her black community and the insults of domestic violence was a reflection of her inner isolation and helplessness. The little girl was afraid to face the insult when she was bullied by a black boy in her class at school. As a result of the repeated occurrence of such traumatic events, she became extremely timid and fearful, and naturally chose to remain silent and escape. Only then would she feel safe.

Based on the ideas of Judith Herman, an American trauma expert, "when insulted children become aware of danger, they either run from it or placate it in order to protect themselves" (Freud, 2003:18). Pecola chose to escape. When confronted with the arrogant and rude attitude of Kabowusky, the white candy store owner, she cowered, lowered head and said nothing timidly. When she was raped by her father, because she was too young to stop it, she told her mother afterwards. Instead of being comforted and supported, Pauline did not believe her. An 11-year-old girl cannot find a way to protect herself, so she has to choose to be silent and escape. After this series of insults, Pecola felt that her existence was insignificant to the world, and that she could only feel safe by escaping into her fantasy world. Although her body survived, her nerves fell apart.

2.2.2 Self-identity Crisis

Black people should face up to their own national culture and inherit this national characteristic, so as to survive and develop in the powerful culture dominated by white people. In *The Bluest Eye*, most black people lose themselves, lose confidence in their own unique national culture and follow the cultural standards of white people. "When a patient suffers an injury, he or she loses self-certainty, leading to a gradual crisis of identity loss" (Herman, 2010:24), says Herman as Pecola often get lost and confused about her black identity. When she was laughed at and humiliated, she was angry and unhappy. But she attributed the misfortune and trauma to her black skin and ugliness, envied white people's blue eyes, wished she was one of the white people. However, she had no ability to change the reality, fantasizing owning white blue eyes. It is a loss of faith in the racial identity of black people and a crisis of self-identity. Pecola thought a pair of blue eyes will gain the respect of the white, the black community and family. She did not realize that in the context of mainstream white culture, marginalized blacks and the white aesthetic of white is beautiful, black skin will always be ignored, unless blacks could unite to defend their native culture. Pecola put all her hopes in the non-existent blue eyes, blindly believing that miracles could happen and dreams could come true, which was the most serious symptom of losing one's identity.

2.2.3 Falling into schizophrenia

The term schizophrenia originally came from Freud's theory of the unconscious. Pecola was not aware of her split. Her schizophrenia was mainly reflected in her fragmented consciousness. Based on Judith Hermann's idea that "schizophrenia is the destruction and fragmentation of the integrated functions of consciousness, memory and identity" (Herman, 2010:33). Pecola's trauma manifested itself in the incoherence of her emotions, consciousness, and actions. After facing the racial discrimination of white people and the rejection of black compatriots in the community, the little black girl had nowhere to vent her pain, and the symptoms of trauma became more and more serious. She felt inferior and often looked at her identity through the eyes of the outside world, so that a deeply ingrained distorted sense of beauty formed in her mind. White skin was a symbol of nobility, civilization and beauty, while black skin was a symbol of lowliness, vulgarity and ugliness. In the context of white mainstream culture, black people fail to face up to their traditional culture. As Morrison described in the novel, Pecola's injuries were so thorough that she became fantasized, often swimming aimlessly in the streets and chatting with her own imaginary world: her only friend. Pecola, disillusioned with her blue eyes, believed the world had abandoned her and eventually broke down into schizophrenia.

2.3 Causes for Pecola's Failure to Heal Trauma

In the process of trauma recovery, the victim first needs to establish a sense of security, and then tell others about his or her experience and feelings. Such narration can help the victim understand the meaning of the trauma, deal with the trauma with a positive attitude, and then resume contact with others to rebuild himself or herself. However, Pecola failed to heal her trauma and led to her own tragedy. This part will summarize Pecola's failure of healing trauma.

2.3.1 Being Unable to Connect with the Outside World

Pecola was lucky enough to be taken to Claudia's house after Cholly set their house on fire. Although this was a poor black family, there was warm love between the family members. They were survivors of western racism. Because of their tolerance and love, they took Pecola in when she was homeless.

Arriving at Claudia's house, Pecola was taken good care of. In order not to let Pecola feel alone, the Claudia sisters tried to make her happy every day, they took out their own cookies and milk to share with her, the hospitality of the Claudia sisters made Pecola eliminate the strangeness. She slowly let down her guard. During this period of time with Claudia's family, Pecola felt the love of Claudia's family, and she slowly built a sense of security. Herman believes that trauma cannot be faced alone and that healing is possible only in a healthy relationship. Pecola's environment at this time was very conducive to her healing. But Pecola couldn't stay with Claudia for long and eventually she would move back to her home. The sense of security and love that was built in Claudia's home was temporary. She had to leave the family when her relationships with other people were not fully established and her sense of security was not completely rebuilt. This undoubtedly made all previous efforts in vain. Leaving Claudia's home, her healing stage halted and she had to face the trauma all over again.

2.3.2 Failure to Get Guidance from Listeners

After leaving Claudia's family, Pecola had a chance to heal her trauma a second time. Three prostitutes lived in the upstairs of Pecola. They were warm and friendly. They had no noble heart, and all three hated males very much. Their conversations often revolved around cursing men and playing tricks on them. When Pecola was around, they still make frivolous jokes, and if Pecola wanted to join them, they won't refuse. They treated Pecola sincerely, gave Pecola love. After being abused by both whites and blacks, Pecola had sense of presence only in the three prostitutes' home, and only they are willing to treat her equally. Pecola chose to come here whenever she was treated unfairly, and Pecola slowly built up her sense of security. In the process of trauma recovery, if the listener can give the right guidance and suggestion, it can help the narrator to correctly understand the trauma that happened to him or her, so as to establish a correct concept. The three prostitutes did not look at Pecola in a different way, giving her respect, which helped Pecola establish a sense of security. However, Pecola tried to reassess the trauma by connecting the three with the outside world, trying to talk to them, and that was not possible. All three of them had unsound personalities and were victims of the society, struggling to survive between black people and white people. Under such circumstances, they could not objectively and calmly feel Pecola's trauma, give her the right guidance and help her build the right personality. What they could do for Pecola was not to help her heal, but to give her a little comfort once in a while.

2.3.3 Misinterpretation of Faith

When no one around her could save Pecola, Pecola began to rebuild her faith. So she chose soap head pastor, hoping that through him, she could establish contact with god and get a pair of blue eyes. At this moment, Pecola's heart was full of hope, also had a deep faith in god. If the soap head pastor could use the name of god, to give Pecola correct guidance, to help rebuild her personal identity, rather than trying to change their eyes to close to the white culture, then Pecola may heal trauma by god, however, soap head pastor was not qualified. He did disgusting things in the name of god. He told Pecola to poison the old dog. Pecola watched the dog die. The death of the dog represented the death of god in Pecola's heart. God was no longer the holy and noble image in Pecola's heart. Pecola finally understood that god could not save herself and her faith collapsed completely. Eventually, she went completely mad.

Conclusion

Pecola suffered not only from the discrimination of white and the rejection of the black community, but also from the injuries of her family. After the trauma, Pecola showed some trauma symptoms. She showed a strong sense of isolation, self-loathing, and led to schizophrenia. Eventually Pecola hoped to rebuild herself through her faith, but unfortunately, instead, the priest pushed her into the abyss. Therefore, some reflections can be drawn from the experience of Pecola. To resist cultural hegemony, the world's culture is rich and diverse, and each nation has the right to defend its own traditional culture. Secondly, to recognize self-worth and self-respect. Thirdly, to create a harmonious family environment just like the Claudia family. A harmonious family environment can make children grow up healthier.

Through the presentation of Pecola's trauma, it is not just about the individual trauma of Pecola, it is about all the black people's collective trauma. *The Bluest Eye* vividly shows the plight of the black race under the domination of white hegemony in the United States at that time and the trauma inflicted on individuals and groups. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison presents the situation of the black race to the readers at that time and also seek a way out for the black race to heal the trauma. Only by facing up to the traumatic experience, rediscovering themselves in the environment of love, and reconstructing their own cultural beliefs can they get out of the haze of trauma. In today's multicultural background, how the black nation can stick to its own national spirit and cultural beliefs, and how to follow the tide of the world and not be annihilated, this is another implication.

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