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English 1157

July 20, 2006

Where Immorality is Derived:

The Role of Cholly's Past in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

It is often said, to the point of it being cliché, that people are simply products of their environment. While this may be a gross simplification, when it comes to fiction, the environment surrounding a character's development can often be as important in understanding a character as the character's actions. In the case of The Bluest Eye, by Toni Morrison, Cholly is a character who suffers much during his childhood, who in turn, in his adult life, causes others an immense amount of suffering. While his actions as an adult are unforgivable, it is Cholly's early history that allows the reader to empathize with him to a certain extent; it allows the reader to realize that immoral acts such as child abuse, rape, and domestic violence are partly symptoms of larger societal problems. This has the effect of adding greater depth and meaning to Cholly's character overall.

Cholly begins his life at a disadvantage, abandoned by his single mother to die in "a junk heap by the railroad" (132). His father is also absent during his infancy, leaving town so as not to share responsibility in Cholly's upbringing. Cholly only escapes death because of his Aunt Jimmy who happened to be watching his mother in the process of abandoning him. While Aunt Jimmy acts as a decent and loving surrogate mother, it is not enough to heal any psychological wounds that occur as a result of being an unwanted

child by both parents. Even as Cholly ages, the prospect of learning about his abandonment helps to outline a character with an unstable and unfair start in life.

Cholly's curiosity towards his father results in learning about the apparent selfish life his father lives. In the absence of a strong father figure, he is left without a model of what good fathering entails. From this alone, much can be understood about Cholly's difficulty with comprehending his own role as a father later in life. In recollecting Cholly's father, Aunt Jimmy unknowingly prophesies Cholly's future: "Ain't no Samson ever come to a good end" (133). It is safe to say that Cholly's life, like Samson, will not come to a good end.

After Cholly's aunt dies, he understandably has the desire to find his father, which results in more disappointment. When Cholly eventually locates Samson Fuller, gambling at a craps game, it results in yet another parental rejection as his father exclaims, "Now get the fuck out of my face!" (156). While Samson has no idea he is yelling at his own son, it still cripples Cholly emotionally, demonstrated by his loss of control of his bowels in an alleyway shortly thereafter. Any hope that Cholly may have had in reclaiming some connection to his biological parents is lost after this moment in the novel.

Even the disfunction apparent in Cholly's view of sex is easier to examine once his first encounter with sex is taken into account. While at Aunt Jimmy's funeral, Cholly and Darlene's lovemaking is transformed into an act of voyeuristic rape by the three white hunters, forcing Cholly to simulate sex with Darlene while they watch. During this encounter, Cholly's feelings towards Darlene change to those of hatred and disgust. This hints at a person that no longer views sex as a positive experience, but as an act of

domination, violence, and forced humility. The tragedy of this transformation of Cholly's emotional state is that the violent intent did not originate with him, but with the hunters, who through a wanton act of racism warp Cholly's worldview. With no parental figure for Cholly to fall back on, this emotional state is left to stew in his mind, which affects his ability to cope throughout the novel.

Morrison is careful to highlight the experiences in Cholly's early life of outright rejection, disappointment, racism, and violence that help to shape his psychology. Without these experiences, the reader is left to assume Cholly is nothing more than a bad person—a violent alcoholic with no regard for other people. This would have the effect of creating a two-dimensional characterization, and while it would make it easier to simply hate Cholly for the actions he commits, it would also separate him from his environment, making him little more than a contrived instrument of harm. Cholly is saved from this demonization, and instead Morrison humanizes Cholly by carefully constructing his painful history for the reader to observe.

For comparison, an example of character demonization is Assef from the novel The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini. In this story, Assef is a bully who takes great joy in the agony he inflicts on his victims. From an early age he relishes in beating his classmates to near-death using his brass-knuckles. He makes it a point to terrorize, and eventually rapes, one of the central characters, Hassan, for simply being a Hazara. Assef has a love of Hitler for the way he treated the Jews. Hosseini further connects Assef to Hitler by making him partly German, blue-eyed, and blond: "Born to a German mother and Afghan father, the blond, blue-eyed Assef towered over the other kids" (38). Much later in the story, he ends up as an executioner for the Taliban, and takes pride in

the massacres he helps commit in Mazar-i Sharif. Assef is a sociopath, and at no moment in his life is there a hint of remorse for anything he does.

The only background the author gives Assef is that he is born into a rich family and is of Pashtun heritage. This information alone only allows the reader to come to the conclusion that Assef is simply a spoiled child that takes what he wants to satiate any desire that comes his way.

But the question remains as to where these morbid desires to cause suffering and death originate. With no background to help construct a model of his psyche, Assef simply fills a role as a malevolent instrument of suffering. The reader can easily dismiss Assef as an incarnation of evil—a demon figure—whose only purpose is to cause suffering and death whenever possible. Not only is this demonization of a character inherently two-dimensional, but it also has the effect of isolating Assef from his society; the purpose being to create an inherently evil character who finds solace in the policies of the Taliban. While this is useful for discrediting The Taliban, the character is less believable overall, and the intentions of the author become more transparent.

Cholly, in contrast, is a character who is harder to immediately dismiss as evil. His past experiences guide his actions. While these experiences do not excuse the suffering Cholly causes Pecola, and the rest of his family, they point to deeper problems in society: racism, rape, poverty, and complete disregard for parental responsibilities. By not dismissing Cholly outright, Morrison leaves the reader to question what could drive a human being to commit such baneful acts against his family. The answer is embedded in Cholly's psychology, which is shaped by his experiences.

Cholly's past corrupts his sense of morality, which is chaotic and leans heavily towards nihilism. Cholly has little to no emotional control; no safety check for his ego. Morrison emphasizes Cholly's lack of control by stating that, because of Cholly's experiences "there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him" (160). Cholly lets his desires overcome him, resulting in destructive consequences for his family.

The most explicit example of Cholly's inability to control his desires is during the rape of Pecola. When Cholly first encounters Pecola in the kitchen, his mind is a whirlwind of emotion: "The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love" (161). Cholly's mental state is influenced by alcohol, amplifying the confusion created by the harsh experiences of his past. Cholly does not know how to feel toward his own daughter. He does not consider what is appropriate. He only considers the particular reaction he has at the moment, without consideration for its outcome if acted upon.

There exists a strong connection between Cholly's mental state during the rape of Pecola and the simulated act of sex instigated by the hunters. After Cholly rapes Pecola, he takes a look at the aftermath of his actions and experiences emotions that contrast one another: "Again the hatred mixed with tenderness" (163). Part of Cholly wants to destroy Pecola, and part of him feels sorry for her. This is similar to how Cholly feels towards Darlene after the hunters depart: "Cholly wanted to strangle her, but instead he touched her leg with his foot. 'We got to get, girl. Come on!'" (149). Cholly's psyche is torn, with a large amount of instability that has accumulated over time due in part to his experience with the hunters. Part of Cholly is compassionate, wanting to protect Pecola,

and part of him agrees with the message that society sends to him repeatedly: that being black is reason enough to be despised.

The consequences of Cholly's actions are then given greater meaning; they point to themes in the novel instead of directly at Cholly. One significant theme is the cyclical nature of society's effects on human nature: a sick society begets damaged psyches which perpetuate a sick society. In other words, it is dangerous to suppose that the damage committed by acts of racism have only an immediate effect upon the victim. Victims often create more victims.

Morrison creates a character that, while easy to despise, is more a commentary on a racist society. By paying attention to the details of Cholly's early life, Morrison ensures that the suffering Cholly causes appears less random, the consequences of which are a result of a troubled society. In her afterward, Morrison explains her strategy of getting her readers to acknowledge the influence society has in the novel: "In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to" (211). Cholly's importance is purposely elevated, making him not a character simply to despise, but one to analyze closer to reveal a deeper message that Morrison hopes to convey to her readers.

Works Cited

Hosseini, Khaled. *The Kite Runner*. New York: Riverhead, 2003.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Penguin, 1994.