

Dissecting Impotent African American Males in *The Bluest Eyes*

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Abstract—Although Toni Morrison concentrates on African American female's subjectivity in *The Bluest Eye*, she does not ignore the way African American males construct their subjectivity. This thesis centers on how African American males are made impotent in their pursuit of manhood; how they are dehumanized, and how their failure impacts on their community.

Index Terms—impotence, pursuit of manhood, dehumanized

To explore African American males' subjectivity, Tony Morrison devotes the most pages, in comparison with other characters, to Cholly, an African American male who is made impotent, dehumanized, and deprived of his self.

I. CHOLLY -- A DEHUMANIZED BEAST WITH A VULNERABLE HEART

When Cholly was young, he craved for manhood, yet was made sexually impotent. Living with Aunt Jimmy does not help him achieve manhood. He cannot live as a man with her. He longs for his father who embodies manhood.

The death of Aunt Jimmy compels Cholly to enter manhood, but he is made impotent at the moment when he just begins the journey to manhood. After Blue Jake demonstrates how to seduce a girl with his manhood, Cholly manages to develop his manhood by inviting Darlene for walk. To his surprise, he succeeds in the initial step of becoming a man. However, he is made impotent at the climax of achieving sexual pleasure. The white hunters brutally interfere with the event that can help him develop his manhood. They coerce him to continue his sex with Darlene as if he were a beast. They call him "coon", and tease him by saying that "the coon ain't comed yet" (Morrison, 1972, p.148). They do not treat him as a human being, whose sexual orgasm never comes under enforcement. As they leave, they again confirm Cholly's state as a "coon baby" (Morrison, 1972, p.149). In the wilderness, Cholly is treated as a beast. He was brutally frustrated on his way to manhood. Cholly does not direct his anger at the white hunters but at Darlene instead. As Chikwenye Ogunyemi, puts it: "Cholly's transference of anger onto the helpless Darlene also illustrates his desperate clinging to the shred of manhood under the threat of racial emasculation." (Chikwenye, 1997, p.39) However desperate he is, his sexual impotence caused by the white hunters is fatal to his developing manhood. When the white men take their leave, they "crush the pine needle underfoot" (Morrison, 1972, p.149). Cholly's budding manhood is as fragile as the pine needles their feet trample, and the white destroy his manhood effortlessly as the step on the needles. Symbolically, Cholly's manhood is crushed and he is made psychologically impotent for the rest of his life.

Like Sammy and Junior, Cholly lacks a father as his model to establish his manhood. The absence of a paternal model in the black family indirectly explains black males' failure to achieve manhood. Cholly was born as a child whose father had "taken off pretty quick before he was born" (Morrison, 1972, p.133). Without a father as his model, he is at a loss to pursue his manhood. He desperately wants to regard any possible agent as his father for him to emulate, and he even attempts to retrieve his father, who had left him when he was born, as a model of manhood. During the process of searching for his father, Cholly believes that he is on the way towards reuniting with his father, or his manhood. However, the most frustrating aspect of his journey lies in the fact that when he meets his father, he finds his father unworthy of his respect; in other words, the moment he finds his father is also, quite ironically, the moment he lost his father, as a model of manhood, completely. If he does not actually find his father, he can project the image of his father as a model of manhood on any qualified agent, but since he discovers that his father is not "a giant of a man" and that he is "taller than his father," (Morrison, 1972, p.155) the possibility of achieving his manhood through a father model vanishes. Cholly finds himself "in the end of his journey" (Morrison, 1972, p.155), he also terminates his journey to manhood for no black man will be able to help him be a man when no black man is, in the eyes of the white people, virile and manly enough to be called a "man".

Cholly raped his own daughter to retrieve his manhood. When he was a boy, he was made impotent by the white hunters who interfered in his sexual intercourse with Darlene. He failed to construct his manhood by "engaged eliciting sexual pleasure from a little country girl," (Morrison, 1972, p.42). The impotence caused by the appearance of the white hunters induces him to retrieve his manhood by means of oppressing his daughter, who is much more vulnerable than and inferior to Cholly. As Stepto says that "One way for him (Cholly) to rid himself of his fears is to project them onto Pecola, and in part he tries to destroy those fears by raping her." (Stepto, 1987, p.152)

Pauline does not help Cholly retrieve his manhood through the sexual intercourse in their marriage partly because she is brave enough to fight against him and partly because she is even more masculine than he. Pauline only aggravates

him impotence in their sexual relationship. In the evening, he, as a boy was made impotent by the intrusion of the sadistic and castrating gaze of the white hunters, and again in the “morning” he cannot avoid being made impotent by another intruder—Pauline, who intends to put up a fight with him one morning in his pleasure of sleeping. His impotence accompanies him timelessly, and mixes with each other.

The moment he sees Pecola washing dishes reminds him of his double impotence; her vulnerability and inferiority, both of which Pauline lacks, encourage him to retrieve his manhood by oppressing her, or raping her. To cure his sexual impotence, the white hunters and the Pauline who fights against him must be eliminated. Namely, if he can have sex with Darlene in the absence of the white hunters and if he can live with Pauline and has sex with her without her fighting against him, he may achieve his manhood, but it is not the case.

Nevertheless, Pecola meets with the requisites of an ideal femininity that compensates for his castrated manhood: She exists as the combination of Darlene and Pauline who does not fight against him in their sex. Pecola’s youth brings Cholly back to the moment when he is about to have sex with Darlene. At that moment, Darlene also arouses “the excitement collecting inside him” and “moans a little” as Pecola releases “a hollow such of air in the back of her throat” (Morrison, 1972:163). When Cholly constructs his manhood by raping Pecola, sexual desire vents and intervention does not occur. On the other hand, Pecola also vicariously plays the role of Pauline who does not fight back. Pecola acts like Pauline Cholly first meets: she is “scratching toe as Pauline was doing the first time he saw her” (Morrison, 1972, p.162). Yet, Pecola does not fight against him. Like Darlene, Pecola offers Cholly the “sexual desire” and the total submission (Morrison, 1972, p.163). Cholly seems to retrieve his manhood by oppressing Pecola, for she dispels the obstacles that hinder him from achieving manhood. Even though he is made impotent and dehumanized, he seemingly performs his manhood by oppressing the one who is inferior and more vulnerable than he.

II. SAMMY -- AN ANGRY BOY WITH A THWARTED DESIRE FOR MANHOOD

Like his father Cholly, Sammy, as young African American male, exhibited his desire for manhood, but victimized even by his own father Cholly.

When Sammy was a boy, he showed how he craves for manhood. Growing up in a family fraught with fights, he searched for his manhood by “cursed for a while, or left the house, or threw himself into the fray” (Morrison, 1972, p.43). It must be frustrating for Sammy to witness the fight of his parents in which his father hurts himself. Cholly “hit(s) his hand against the metal bed frame,” (Morrison, 1972, p.44) for his failure to harm his wife implies his failure to assert his manhood. He hurts not only his hand but also his manhood. Sammy craves for manhood which should be embodied by his father, but is frustrated to see how his father’s manhood maimed and injured.

Overwhelmed by such a frustration that stems from his Oedipal Expectation, Sammy “suddenly began to hit his father about the head with both fist, shouting ‘You naked fuck!’ over and over and over” (Morrison, 1972, p.44). That Sammy abuses and hits his father denotes Sammy’s thwarted desire for manhood.

In the fight between Pauline and Cholly, when Cholly misses his beat on Pauline, Sammy succeeds in hitting his father as if he accomplished, by violence, the manhood his father fails to acquire. A feeling of manhood may thus permeate Sammy in his repetitive hitting his father. Like Cholly, Sammy leaves the home that does not provide him a script of manhood. He leaves home to find other modes of articulating manhood, but that he escapes the home “no less than twenty-seven times” (Morrison, 1972, p.43) reveals his more than twenty-seven failures to achieve manhood in his journey away from home. The more times he flees from home, the more he reveals his desire for and failure of manhood.

III. JUNIOR -- A SADIST IN A LOVELY HOUSE WITHOUT LOVE

Like Sammy, Junior also endeavors to gain his manhood. Born in a “neat and quiet” family, Junior desires manhood by “having (black boys) push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him” (Morrison, 1972, p.87). It is impossible for him to obtain such manhood in his family, which precludes him from touching anything related to the toughness of manhood. To grab manhood, he “wants to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say ‘Fuck you’ with that lovely casualness” (Morrison, 1972, p.87). His mother, Ceraldine, forbids anything like that, and his father, Louis, cares nothing about it. Since his family does not provide him with a realistic script for achieving manhood, he resorts to the community outside of his family: “Junior consider the playground his own” (Morrison, 1972, p.86). He displaces his desire for manhood into the ownership of the playground. In dominating the ground, he feels a sense of manhood. However, to dominate the playground cannot satisfy his desire: “He hated to see the swings, slides, monkey bars, and seesaws empty, and tried to get kids to stick around as long as possible” (Morrison, 1972, p.86). It seems that through the ownership of the playground and that of the humans playing within, he secures his manhood. The playground provides him with the power to control and dominate something or even someone, and the children playing in the ground offers him a self that embodies manhood and that he believes is attainable through ownership of a place. The more he shoots at the children who refuse to play in the ground under his command, the more he reveals his frustrated desire for manhood.

It is Geraldine who makes her son, Junior, impotent in acquiring his manhood. At the very beginning of Junior’s journey towards manhood, he discovers that his mother does not help him develop his manhood. Instead, Geraldine

“washes away” his manhood by having Junior “always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod” (Morrison, 1972, p.86). If the dirt proves his manhood when he plays with other black boys, then the bath Geraldine loves to impose upon him prohibits him from achieving it. When he admires Bay Boy and P. L. as “his idols” who embody manhood, his mother induces him to believe that “neither Bay Boy nor P. L. good enough for him” (Morrison, 1972, p.87) Geraldine makes Junior impotent by distancing him from his idols who may lead him to manhood. Therefore, he is discouraged from feeling his manhood in “sit(ing) with them on curbstones and comparing the sharpness of jackknives, the distance and arcs of spitting” (Morrison, 1972, p.87).

Moreover, Geraldine changes Junior into an impotent man who is not allowed to express his emotion. She does “not allow her baby, Junior, to cry” (Morrison, 1972, p. 86). As for a baby, the only way to express all sorts of emotion is to cry. Geraldine, however, forbids him to vent his feelings, and later he cannot express himself in his boyhood. When barred from accessing and expressing his emotions, he cannot feel good about him, not to mention own himself as a man. Geraldine also does “not talk to him, soo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts” (Morrison, 1972, p.86). An intimate relationship with his mother is not properly constructed, and that influence the way he communicates and plays with others in his boyhood. He “want(s) to play King of the Mountains” (Morrison, 1972, p.87) Being a king, he spares the necessity to communicate with others; for all he has to do is to send commands and orders like his mother does to him. He thus loses the chance to participate in a community of manhood, if there is one. Though Junior strives to achieve manhood, Geraldine continuously impedes his desire to be a man.

Frustrated in his pursuit of manhood at his family and at school Junior oppresses Pecola as a way to perform his manhood and to save him from impotence. His house is a space of impotence for him; as a result, he likes to stay in the other space of manhood outside of his home, the playground. Junior is “frightened at home, and the playground is his joy” (Morrison, 1972, p.88). When he stays at home, the cat deprives him of his manhood, yet when he stays in the playground, he feels his manhood by being a lord over it.

Pecola does not belong to a group of African American girls who will, to be sure, fight against Junior’s harassment fiercely; therefore, Junior chooses her as a vehicle to exercise his mistaken masculinity with acts of violence in his house. Since the power the cat wields causes Junior to feel deprived of his manhood, and since Pecola’s lack of power makes him feel charged with manhood, Junior attempts to remove his impotence and recover his manhood through his oppression of Pecola and his abuse of the cat.

The place in which Junior abuses Pecola is significant. Even though the living room represents a space of Junior’s impotence and the playground represents that of his manhood, the playground is not the ideal site for him to perpetuate acts of domestic violence both on the cat and on Pecola. Therefore, Junior invites Pecola into another room which serves as a space that enables Junior to assert his physical strength by both abusing the cat and Pecola. In the Newly-created space of manhood, Junior throws “a big black cat right in (Pecola) face” (Morrison, 1972, p.89). It seems that he aims to get rid of his impotence at the expense of Pecola, a girl who is inferior and more vulnerable than he.

When Pecola intends to leave the house and to escape Junior’s scheme of doing away with his impotence, he exclaims, “You can’t get out. You’re my prisoner” and thus he becomes the lord of Pecola (Morrison, 1972, p. 90). If Pecola leaves the house without having a chance to rid him of his impotence by killing the cat and physically harming Pecola, Junior fears he will forever be condemned to roam between the space of impotence and that of manhood as before. And if Pecola forms an alliance with cat, his impotence will be everlasting. Thus when the relationship between Pecola and the cat is about to resemble that between Geraldine and the cat, Junior desperately creates a space in which the cat, Pecola, and himself join together by “snatching the cat by one of its hind legs and be beginning to swing it around his head in a circle” (Morrison, 1972, p. 91) and his impotence, his manhood, and his self mix with each other in this new sphere. Junior became a real lord of this space. Even after the space breaks down by Pecola’s intervention, his manhood is restored because the cat that represents his impotencies “thrown full force against the window” (Morrison, 1972, p. 91). Junior retrieves his manhood by means of oppressing Pecola and abusing a cat.

To shift from exploring the formation of manhood of one individual African American young male to that of the African American males as a whole, Morrison characterizes some of the school boys as a group of males who desire for manhood yet are made impotent collectively. A group of black boys want to prove their manhood by “circling and holding at bay a victim, Pecola Breedlove” (Morrison, 1972, p.65). Black boys experience the cultural pressures unconsciously. We are told that their meanness to Pecola is an expression of their own self-hatred. They can taunt her for being black—“Black e mo Black e mo”—because they hate their own blackness. These black boys “like a necklace of semiprecious stones ... surround her (Pecola),” and in their space of manhood, they feel their manhood. However, they are made impotent by Claudia, Maureen, and Frieda. Frieda disintegrates their enterprise of manhood by “snatching her coat from her head and throws it on the ground” (Morrison, 1972, p.66). When she throws her coat on the ground where these black boys attempt to assert their manhood, the space of manhood immediately breaks down, and so does their manhood. One of the boys “looks frightened and wall his eyes” as if he were Pecola who also “covered her eyes with her hands” when she becomes a victim. Claudia indirectly leads them to be scrutinized by Maureen’s powerful gaze, and Maureen makes them impotent with her “eyes” and “gaze”. These girls not only break the black boy’s space of manhood, but also expel them from it. Thus when the black boys leave the playground, they “move away” from manhood to impotence.

IV. MR. HENRY -- A "NASTY DOG" WITH A LECHEROUS INSIDE

Dehumanized, adult black males tend to re-construct their manhood by oppressing young African American females who are more vulnerable and powerless than themselves.

Henry Washington forsakes women and molests young females to prove his manhood. He is dehumanized for he is regarded, in African American women's conversation, as "old dog" and "nasty". For them, "some men just dogs" (Morrison, 1999:13). Being a beast, his physical body rather than his self calls for attention. He fails to be a man, and thus resorts to forsaking woman and molesting girls as a way to feel his manhood. As a dirty dog, he cannot feel his manhood if he keeps on living with Miss Della Jones, a girl who is "a nice good church woman" and "just too clean for him" (Morrison, 1972, p.13). A Clean, good woman like Della can only lead him to impotence. He wants "a woman to smell like a woman" (Morrison, 1972, p.13).

If he oppresses strong females, he will end up like Junior being beaten by them. Therefore, he chooses Frieda as an easy target who is inferior in strength. Frieda's father exhibits his manhood by attacking Mr. Henry, and reveals how Mr. Henry constructs his manhood on the oppression of African American girls. Mr. MacTeer throws "old tricycle at Mr. Henry's head and knock him off the porch" (Morrison, 1972, p.100). Furthermore, Frieda's father takes "the gun" and "shot at" Mr. Henry (Morrison, 1972, p.100). Mr. Henry is nothing more than an impotent, dehumanized man who constructs his manhood by sexually oppressing African American females.

V. SOAPHEAD -- A MISANTHROPIST WITH A CRAZE FOR THINGS

Soaphead Church also performs his manhood by molesting African American females, especially girls. His "manhood is defined by acquisitions," (Morrison, 1972, p.177) so he cannot but "love things" (Morrison, 1972, p.164). "Through his fondness for things," (Morrison, 1972, p.165) he constructs his own manhood. However, his manhood is lost not by his being treated as a beast but by his "genuine love of worn objects" (Morrison, 1972, p.165). Anything related to humans "produce in him a faint but persistent nausea" (Morrison, 1972, p.164) Therefore, he must treat humans as things otherwise he can never get along with them. When Velma leaves him, she makes him impotent. He regarded her as a thing to possess and to construct his manhood since his manhood was defined by the ownership of things or humans. As he describes Velma's departure from him as "people leave a hotel room" (Morrison, 1972, p.177), he also dehumanized himself as a hotel room that is impotent to hold Velma back in his attempt to assert his ownership and manhood. Impotent and dehumanized, he turns to molesting "the little girls" even though he does not think that he is hurting them and that they feel harmed. While he is molesting little girls, he feels a sense of owning the girls as things and therefore a feeling of thriving manhood. "The little girls are the only things he will miss" (Morrison, 1972, p.181) at the end of his life.

Soaphead, like Mr. Henry, oppresses African American females to cure his impotence, for the girls are "the humans whose bodies least offensive" and "usually manageable and frequently seductive" (Morrison, 1972, p.166)

Morrison describes African American males as impotent, dehumanized beasts for the purpose of arousing pity rather than blame. As Margaret, Wilkerson observes, "There is also an implicitly forgiving attitude in Morrison towards all her characters. We understand Cholly and Soaphead Church, and I find it impossible to hate them; their actions seem as inevitable as Pauline's." (Margaret, 1988, p.72) African American males do not dehumanize themselves and oppress young African American females out of their own volition. Cholly is made impotent by the white hunters; Junior by the white value internalized by his mother, the school boys by their contempt for their skin color denoting their race, Mr. Henry by other women's regarding him as a dog, and Soaphead by his craze for things. Morrison does not mean to justify their oppression of females or themselves, but intends to remind African Americans that African American males are the products of a distorted society of racism and sexism. They all strive to be a man and human, but the dehumanizing ideologies of a dominant, racially oppressive society deter them from achieving it. Helplessness haunts them, and thus the oppression of other people becomes the only way they respond to their own oppression. Both racism and sexism are too intense to allow them to respond in a proper way. Moreover blame conceals their helplessness, while pity helps African Americans recognize their situation and avoid reinforcing the hate thriving within their community. In understanding the plight of males, a fortification of subjectivity within African American males and females may establish.

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