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A Character Analysis of Cholly Breedlove in Tony Morrison's: "*The Bluest Eye*"

Throughout Toni Morrison's acclaimed novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she provides the reader with plethora of rich and well-rounded characters. None of her characters however, are more harrowing and detestable as Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's father. Morrison paints the character of Cholly as a sick and disgusting character that commits atrocities which shape the lives of others throughout the novel. In many ways, the character of Cholly is the catalyst of what sets the novel in motion. Without Cholly, there would be no Pecola and without Pecola, there would be no novel. Cholly's character is one that possesses many diverse attributes, some clear and vivid, others bit harder to uncover. He has however, as the novel suggests, undergone a vast amount of trauma which has shaped him into the monster that he has become in the novel. Therefore, by analyzing the character of Cholly Breedlove through the lens of both Jeffery Cohen's monster theory and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, in addition to viewing him through Toni Morrison's own characterization, one can clearly see how, though certainly an evil and despicable character, Cholly Breedlove was a tragic example of an individual whose traumatic past shaped his future monstrosity.

One of the most traumatic experiences that Cholly experienced throughout his life, was one that he himself cannot even physically remember yet the effects of this event, went on to shape much of his character throughout the novel. Though certainly not the single biggest factor in his monster development, the abandonment he experienced at the hand of his own mother at

the railroad tracks a mere four days after his birth certainly played a large role in Cholly's life. Though Cholly himself does not physically remember the instance his mother left him, his great aunt Jimmy, explains how it was her who saved him from certain death. Though grateful to his great aunt for rescuing him, Cholly's early childhood and upbringing is filled with many unanswered questions as to why his mother didn't "want" him. So much so that Cholly ponders if it would have been more convenient for him to have died "down in the rim of tire under the soft black Georgia sky" (Morrison 133). Cathy Caruth, in her book entitled *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, defined trauma as a "wound inflicted not to the body, but to the mind" (Caruth 3) and this definition can be clearly seen in Cholly. Though not old enough to physically remember the trauma of being abandoned by his mother, the lasting effects of the trauma impacted his mind and character, more than any actual physical trauma could. Caruth also suggest that trauma as opposed to a physically induced trauma wound, does not reappear in one consciousness "until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Caruth 4). Caruth therefore suggests that trauma is cyclical in nature as, like the monsters in Cohen's monster theory, they tend to never escape the consciousness of the individual.

Though the deserting of Cholly's mother definitely had an impact on Cholly's life, the birth of the monster found within Cholly can be found in his first sexual encounter and the humiliation he experiences at the hands of the white men. After having begun to fool around with a girl named Darlene in the woods, Cholly and Darlene are discovered by two white men off on a hunt. The white men catch Cholly in the act and taunt, ridicule him all while urging him to "get on with it." Interestingly Cholly is alerted of the white men's presence by "their smell" (Morrison 147). In addition to being humiliated, Cholly begins to feel an intense hatred for Darlene despite the fact that a mere five minutes prior, he was making out with her. His hatred for

her is so deep in fact, that he never even considers directing his hate towards the hunters who laughed and ridiculed him. He hated her for “creating the situation and being a witness to his failure, his impotence” (Morrison 151). It is this instance that births the monster within Cholly. In his book entitled *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffery Jerome Cohen formulates seven theses which set the foundation of his theoretical framework of monster theory. In the first thesis, Cohen states that monsters are birthed at a “metaphorical crossroads” stemming from “a specific moment in time, feeling, and place” (Cohen 4). Cholly’s first sexual encounter with Darlene and the audience of white men, was the spark which lit the monstrous flame within Cholly. Were it not for this experience, Cholly’s behavior towards women, which had already been marred by the behavior shown to him by his mother, would have been very different and the events that follow throughout the novel could have possibly been avoided.

The most horrifying and twisted act which Cholly commits in the novel, is that of the raping of his own daughter and main protagonist throughout the story, Pecola. Upon seeing his daughter reach down and scratch her foot just Darlene did so many years ago, reawakens Cholly’s desire he had for Darlene and subsequently relives the events from that experience again in his mind all while staring at his daughter. This reliving of past experience is described by Caruth as cyclical trauma. Caruth states that trauma is “very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance— returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Cholly experiences this before raping his daughter, and after performing the violent and despicable transgression, which he justifies as being “out of love”, he views Pecola with passionate revulsion just as he also viewed Darlene with. Yet again, the cyclical essence of trauma is made manifest in Cholly’s life and he again falls into its grasp. Why is it then, that Cholly performs this unpardonable transgression? Why is it that he behaves in such a frivolous

way so much so that he runs away after raping his own daughter? The answer lies in Cholly's view of himself and the definition of the word: free.

One aspect of Cholly's character that is clearly seen throughout the novel is his freedom. Following his brief encounter with his father, Cholly begins to ponder and reflect on his life and it is during this moment that Cholly begins to realize that he is truly free; dangerously free even. "Free to feel whatever he felt – fear, guilt, shame, love, grief pity" (Morrison 159). This freedom creates an identity crisis within Cholly which is, yet again, in line with Cohen's monster theory. In his third thesis, Cohen states that monsters often possess a "refusal to participate in the classificatory order of things" (Cohen 6). By choosing to do and feel whatever he wants, Cholly demonstrates a refusal of the societal norm going as far as to say that he is free to knock a woman in her head, as he would have already cradled that very same head in his lap (Morrison 159). Cohen states that monsters are "disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include themselves in any systemic structuration" (Cohen 6). This denial of societal structure and belief in a sick sense of freedom, is a perfect example of the monstrosity which is shown in Cholly's character and within his own thoughts.

Tony Morrison herself states that she did not wish to dehumanize her characters, including Cholly. If we utilize Caruth's trauma theory, one can see that Cholly has experienced much trauma and this has gone on to shape his character subsequently turning him into the monster shown throughout the latter portion of the novel. However, though her character of Cholly Breedlove certainly demonstrates monstrousness, Morrison also refrains from sugar-coating the dark and twisted themes addressed throughout the novel. By doing this, Morrison demonstrates that she is aware that society is infatuated with the monstrous. Though there are many instances throughout the novel in which the reader could easily choose to close the book

and cease to continue reading, Cohen states that monsters are “continually linked to forbidden practices, in order to normalize and to enforce” (Cohen 16). Morrison uses this subconsciously perhaps, but in the end the effect remains the same. Morrison’s readers, as much as they detest and despise Cholly, secretly yearn to possess his freedom and his freedom to “live and die.”

Perhaps one of the most troubling and eye-awakening theses in Cohen’s monster theory states that monsters are actually a desire (Cohen 16). He states that monsters “the very same creatures who terrify and interdict, can evoke potent escapist fantasies” (Cohen 16). In other words, humanity is infatuated with monsters up to a certain extent. Cohen writes that monsters themselves dwell within the borders of existential crises and as result, are often harbingers of category crises. This in combination with society’s jealousy towards monsters and their freedom, creates an attempt to break free from the societal constraints lain in place. This, however, as Cohen states, results in a linking of monstrosity “with the forbidden which makes the monster all the more appealing as a temporary egress from constraint” (Cohen 17). This trancelike fascination with monstrosity however, is not indefinite. Cohen goes on to say that society is only awakened from this attraction and necessity for escapist fantasies when the monster starts to overstep societal boundaries and subsequently attempts to tear down the walls of categorical structure and culture (Cohen 17). Interestingly however this process only occurs in the mind of individuals who believe that monstrosity comes to an end. Cohen explains this by using the example of the horror genre. Cohen states that people “watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light” (Cohen 17). This is the difference between the reader and the character of Cholly Breedlove. Cholly believes in a twisted sense of freedom and this strips him of the thought that there will be a

“reentry into the world of comfort and delight.” The reader however, hangs on to the remaining hope that perhaps Pecola will avenger herself of her father’s wrongdoings, or that perhaps Cholly himself will meet a climactic end; all of which, are untrue of the novel. It is this notion, in combination with the freedom which Cholly possesses, that, according to Cohen, explains why the reader would refuse to cease to read Morrison’s novel, as they see Cholly as a representation of their subconscious and therefore envy him.

Though the character of Cholly Breedlove is certainly an evil monster, it could also be argued that he is a reflection of the human subconscious. According to Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, the subconscious is responsible for the sexual and aggressive instincts, fears, and immoral thoughts of our mind. Freud believed that all humans operated from the basis of the subconscious and only used their conscious to mask the existence of their subconscious. Though this could be argued is the reason as to why Cholly Breedlove acts upon his “subconscious” desires, the reality is that Cholly is a tragic example of various traumatic experiences which have become manifested in the flesh of an individual hence turning him into the monster that he is. Had Cholly’s mother not abandoned him and left him in the care of his great aunt, and had he not been ridiculed by the white men on his first sexual experience, Cholly would have never arrived at the crossroads of monstrosity and he would have perhaps never become the monster that he became subsequently saving poor Pecola.

Works Cited

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