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Taking Refuge in “How:” Dissecting the Motives Behind Cholly’s Rape in *The Bluest Eye*

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The following piece was mentored by Dr. Kimberley Chabot-Davis; it was originally written for the Recent American Fiction course. After graduation, Rebecca plans to attend graduate school and pursue a career in education.

Most parents see parts of themselves in their children. They see their own familiar eyes, their sense of humor, and their long legs. Parents desire to nurture their child’s every hope and dream, and also want to raise their children in a safe and secure environment. However, what if a father saw in his daughter everything that he hated in himself? What if this same father never learned to love in a nurturing way from his own parents? The effects would be devastating. Toni Morrison examines such a scenario in her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* through the rape Pecola by her father Cholly Breedlove. The incestuous rape is nearly impossible for a reader to comprehend. While literary critics have postulated that the rape is the soul product of Cholly’s desolate past or an expression of his hatred of women, I argue that Cholly is giving his daughter the only form of love he knows how to express and is simultaneously abusing the image of himself as a child that Pecola embodies.

To better understand Cholly’s action of raping his own daughter, it is important for the reader to acknowledge his past. Since he was abandoned by both parents, Cholly did not grow up in an environment where he was successfully nurtured. His father skipped town when he found out that he had impregnated Cholly’s mother, who then abandoned Cholly in a trash pile soon after he was born. Cholly was left to be raised by his elderly Aunt Jimmy. Although Aunt Jimmy genuinely cared for him, he had difficulty connecting to her as a real parent. He even thinks as a child that “when she made him sleep with her for warmth in winter and he could see her old wrinkled breasts sagging in her nightgown ---then he wondered whether it would have been just as well to have died [in the trash]” (Morrison 132). If Cholly really saw her as a legitimate parent, then he would enjoy sharing a bed with her in winter. Sharing a bed with a parent is generally a pleasant memory for most children. Conversely, Morrison makes this moment between Cholly and Aunt Jimmy uncomfortable and loveless. Since Aunt Jimmy raised Cholly since birth, it would be expected that he would view her as his parent; however, his disgust of sharing a bed with her proves otherwise.

Cholly is also affected by his nonexistent relationship with his birth mother. Aunt Jimmy openly tells Cholly that “[his] mama didn’t name [him] nothing. That nine days wasn’t up before she throwed [him] on the junk heap” (Morrison 133). After this incident, Cholly “didn’t ask anything else” (Morrison 133). It is clear from this reaction that Cholly is bothered by the fact that both

of his parents abandoned him; he chooses never to ask more questions about his parents. Cholly understands from a young age that a parent/child relationship is not necessarily one that is filled with love. Cholly's first example of parenting was to be left nameless in a "junk heap," and then later to be coldly reminded of it by his surrogate mother (Morrison 133). Cholly was not offered any example to show him how to foster a healthy and successful relationship between a parent and child.

By looking through Cholly's past, the reader should not be surprised that he is a broken man. Cholly was sent into the adult world with so little to prepare him for interpersonal relations. In the article "Failures of Love: Female Initiation in the Novels of Toni Morrison," the critic Bakerman persuasively describes Cholly as being "set adrift by the death of his guardian, taunted and humiliated by white men during his first sexual encounter, [...Because he] does not know about nurturing love, and feeling love, he is incapable of expressing it healthfully" (544). As people grow and mature, it is essential for them to have lessons on how to relate to others. Cholly never learned from a parent how to be a parent, and he did not learn from a first lover how to love. With so little to guide him, it is no surprise that this lack of nurturing love would catch up with him in a devastating way. However, his past is not enough to explain how he comes to rape his own daughter. Other aspects of the story, like Cholly's relationship with sex, and his feelings about his daughter Pecola, must be examined.

As Cholly grows older, he finds an outlet to express his affection for someone: sex. Yet Cholly's experiences with sex are still flawed. During his first sexual experience with a girl, Darlene, he is interrupted by two white men who make him continue to have sex and climax while they watch. This situation is extremely damaging for both Cholly and the girl. However, Cholly does not focus his anger and feelings of injustice on the intruders, but instead he chooses to focus them on Darlene. While he is having sex with her in front of the men, he "looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it—long, hard, and painfully, he hated her so much" (Morrison 148). Even after the men leave, the seething hatred for Darlene lingers. When "Darlene [does] not move... Cholly want[s] to strangle her" (Morrison 149). From this experience, Cholly learns that there is another emotion that can be expressed through sex: anger.

After Cholly is married to Pauline, he eventually loses his ability to make love to her; instead "*most times he's thrashing away inside [Pauline] before she's woke, and through when [she] is*" (Morrison 131). This is significant because it demonstrates that even with his wife, whom he should both love and enjoy having sex with, he is no longer able to express himself in a sexually healthy

manner. The only way he knows how to express his affections is through sex, and his selfish approach to it shows proves that he is losing this ability. Sex is becoming a one sided experience for Cholly. He can express his love for Pauline physically, but he leaves nothing for her to enjoy.

Some critics argue that the action of Cholly raping his own daughter in *The Bluest Eye* showcases his hatred towards women. In Mermann- Jozwiak's article, she postulates that Pecola's rape centers on Cholly's hate for his past, but also has to do with "Cholly's disgust for the female body" (195). She is drawing on his experiences with Darlene, and the hate that he felt towards his first lover. However, Cholly is only able to express his appreciation for the female body through sex. Cholly does not have sex with Darlene because he hates her female form; he is expressing his affection for her the only way he knows how. He subconsciously relates sex to anger not because of any deep loathing of Darlene's body, but because of the injustice of having the two men watch him have sex with her. Even though it is flawed, Cholly also has sex with Pauline to express his love for her. If Cholly were to be disgusted by his wife's female form, it would follow that he would not continue to have sex with her. While Mermann-Jozwiak rightfully assumes that Cholly hates that his daughter Pecola embodies his hopeless past, it is a stretch to say that Cholly rapes his daughter because of his disgust for the female body. In order to better understand the rape, it is most important for the reader to have a clear picture of how Cholly views Pecola.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola represents physical qualities that make Cholly feel both love and repulsion simultaneously. Pecola embodies what is wrapped up in the darkest moments of Cholly's childhood. She is ugly, and she "[hides] behind [it]—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom" (Morrison 39). She frequently tries to make herself disappear to escape the reality of the world she lives in. When she tries to do this, "little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush...only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left" (Morrison 45). Pecola tries to disappear because she is so unhappy with not only herself, but also with everyone's reaction to her. She is a rejected child, and it is this quality that connects her with her father.

When Cholly is rejected by his own father, he too tries to make himself disappear. He is so devastated at being turned away by his father that he soils himself. This causes him to run away because "his father would surely emerge and see him and laugh. Oh, Lord. He would laugh... there was only one thing to do" (Morrison 157). Cholly runs away under a pier and he crouches "in the fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight, only darkness" (Morrison 157).

In this instance, Morrison is connecting father and daughter. Both of them feel rejection from someone who should love them, and they try to make it all go away by disappearing.

Moments before Cholly rapes his daughter, he has returned home drunk and sees her washing dishes. His first reaction to her is “revulsion,” which is “a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence” (Morrison 161). He himself is a hopeless character who never received real love and affection from his natural parents, and he knows that he has given none to Pecola. The critic Vickroy writes that Cholly recognizes this: “because Pecola is like Cholly once was, small and impotent.” He begins to question why she should ever love him as a father, because he can offer her nothing. He considers that “if he looked her in the face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him, the love would move him to fury” (Morrison 161). Cholly could both be thinking of the love that was absent in his own father’s eyes when he was rejected. In this sense, Cholly sees Pecola as the physical embodiment of his desolate past.

This hatred for his own past makes Cholly disgusted with his own daughter. However, he also feels the failure of his own parenting when he looks at his daughter. Cholly is aware of his shortcomings, and he considers that “had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing a dying woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children” (Morrison 160-161). He recognizes that “as it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at the moment” (Morrison 160-161). Seeing Pecola as downcast only reminds him that he never learned how to parent. This makes Cholly feel hatred towards himself, as well as Pecola. The literary critic Vickroy expresses this idea well, arguing that “one way for him to rid himself of his fears is to project them onto Pecola, and in part he tries to destroy those fears by raping her.” Cholly has learned through his first sexual encounter that sex is an outlet for him to express this anger. In his own mind, the act of raping Pecola allows him to work through his feelings of anger and fear. What Vickroy does not consider is that Cholly’s rape is not as simple as combating his past; it is much more complicated.

Pecola at this moment also represents what Cholly associates with real love. Cholly first feels repulsion towards his daughter, but this soon dissolves into feelings of tenderness. Pecola’s action of “shift[ing] her weight and [standing] on one foot scratching the back on her calf with her toe” reminds Cholly of the first time he saw Pauline (Morrison 162). This action causes Cholly a different emotion which is “not the usual desire to part tight legs with his own, but a tenderness, a protectiveness”

(Morrison 162). In this way, Pecola is bringing back one of the few true feelings of love that Cholly can recollect. Cholly does not initially have feelings of lust for Pauline, and likewise not initially with Pecola, but instead he experiences feelings of protectiveness and tenderness. These would seem to be fatherly emotions towards a daughter. However, Cholly does not know how to work with these feelings; he only knows how to react to them.

Morrison establishes that Cholly has never had an example of how to parent, how to love. When he is confronted with feelings of love for his daughter, Cholly reacts in a way that feels most natural; that reaction for Cholly is sexual. Even in his relationship with Pauline, the violence that occurs between them is “paralleled only by their lovemaking” (Morrison 43). Cholly is unable to express his love for his wife in any other way than sex. Likewise, when he has feelings of love towards his daughter, his reaction is unfortunately also sexual.

The moment after the rape completely illustrates the culmination of Cholly’s feelings of love and repulsion for his daughter. At this moment, Cholly is still completely intoxicated. He has not fully realized what has transpired, but immediately after he is sexually satisfied there is “again the hatred mixed with the tenderness” (Morrison 163). He is still battling the hate of his past, and the love he cannot appropriately express. Cholly demonstrates his internal struggle fully when “the hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her” (Morrison 163). He meets these feelings in the middle when he leaves her on the kitchen floor covered by a blanket.

Cholly’s rape leaves the reader reeling. It is one of the harder scenes to understand in *The Bluest Eye*. One might even question what exactly Morrison was communicating through the inclusion of the rape. In her interview “The Pain of Being Black” with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison talks about her feelings concerning family. Morrison states that, “the little nuclear family is a paradigm that doesn’t work. It doesn’t work for white people or for black people;” she questions “Why are we hanging onto it?” These comments can help a reader to understand why Morrison allows the rape scene in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison constructs the Breedlove family, a nuclear two-parent family, in *The Bluest Eye* that should theoretically work; their namesake would even suggest that they would breed-love. However, this family is led by an individual who cannot foster love in his own home. Morrison suggests in this interview that the nuclear family is not strong enough to raise healthy children, and instead argues that “you need a whole community –everybody– to raise a child.” In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola, the victim of incestuous rape, is unfortunately rejected by the community around her. This is seen earlier in the novel

when Cholly was rejected by the community as well following the death of Aunt Jimmy. It would follow that this rape serves as an example of the importance of the community raising the child, instead of the nuclear two-parent family. In *The Bluest Eye*, the devastation of both Cholly and Pecola could very well be rooted in the lack of community support around the family.

Cholly's action of raping his own daughter can never be excused; it would not be fair to Pecola to do so. It is still difficult as a reader to fully understand why this rape had to occur. It is devastating for both Pecola and Cholly. The situation only leaves the reader asking why an action like this has to happen. Morrison comments on this perfectly when she writes that, "since the why is too difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how" (Morrison 6). Although how is a poor refuge, it is the only one that can be offered.

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