



“NOBODY PAID US ANY ATTENTION, SO WE PAID VERY GOOD ATTENTION TO OURSELVES”: GIRLHOOD IN TONI MORRISON’S *THE BLUEST EYE*

Fernanda Nunes Menegotto¹
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul
(fernanda.menegotto@gmail.com)

Resumo: Este artigo analisa *The Bluest Eye*, de Toni Morrison, com o objetivo de demonstrar como a idade, gênero e raça das personagens principais influenciam a narrativa e, na verdade, transformam a história no que ela é. A análise é baseada na ideia de *violência ritualística* discutida em Azevedo (2001), nos denominadores comuns da infância norte-americana listados por Mintz (2009), no significado que as bonecas têm na infância das garotas norte-americanas, conforme explorado por Jacobs (2008), e nas características comumente encontradas nos livros infantis que tratam especificamente de garotas afro-americanas, conforme discutido por McNair e Brooks (2012). O artigo demonstra de que maneiras esses fatores atuam juntos sobre as vidas das três meninas que estão no centro da narrativa.

Palavras-chave: literatura norte-americana; literatura afro-americana; Toni Morrison.

Abstract: This article analyzes Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in order to demonstrate how the age, gender and race of the main characters influence the narrative and in fact make the story what it is. The analysis is based on the idea of *ritualistic violence* discussed in Azevedo (2001), the common denominators of American childhood listed by Mintz (2009), the significance dolls have in American girlhood, as explored by Jacobs (2008), and the characteristics commonly found in transitional chapter books specifically about African American young girls discussed by McNair and Brooks (2012). The article demonstrates the ways in which these factors work together in shaping the lives of the three young girls that are in the center of the narrative.

Keywords: North American literature; African American literature; Toni Morrison.

Resumen: Este artículo analiza *The Bluest Eye*, de Toni Morrison, para demostrar cómo la edad, el género y la raza de las personajes principales influyen en la narración y hacen con que la historia sea lo que es. El análisis se basa en la idea de *violencia ritualista* discutida en Azevedo (2001), los denominadores comunes de la infancia estadounidense enumerados por Mintz (2009), la importancia que tienen las muñecas en la infancia de las niñas estadounidenses, según exploró Jacobs (2008), y las características comúnmente encontradas en los libros infantiles específicamente sobre niñas afroamericanas discutidas por McNair y Brooks (2012). El artículo demuestra como estos factores trabajan juntos en la configuración de las vidas de las tres niñas que están en el centro de la narración.

Palabras clave: literatura estadounidense; literatura afroamericana; Toni Morrison.

1. INTRODUCTION

¹ Bacharel em Letras – Habilitação em Tradução (Português/Inglês).



One of the main aspects of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is that it not only tells a story which is primarily focused on female characters, but these characters are also children. Though *The Bluest Eye* has many characters from all ages and of both genders, the center of the narrative is Pecola Breedlove, a young girl, and the main narrator is another, Claudia MacTeer; in 1941, when the main events of the novel are set, they were both children: Claudia was nine and Pecola was eleven.

The Bluest Eye narrates the stories of two black families living in Lorain, Ohio, a town where the majority of the population is white. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer are part of a family that, although poor and susceptible to racism, is perfectly integrated in their own community. Pecola Breedlove, on the other hand, is the daughter of Pauline and Cholly, outsiders who suffer from their own severe troubles: Pauline's sense of self-worth and self-esteem are destroyed by many factors – her continued exposure to limiting and exclusionary beauty standards is the main one; Cholly is an alcoholic and was a victim of abuse and abandonment. Set in 1941 – a year in which Pecola is abused, raped and gets pregnant but loses her baby and her sanity along the way –, the novel takes a non-linear approach to its story; the narrative often goes back in time in order to show us how a cycle of violence, self-hatred and detachment ultimately destroyed young Pecola. Pecola believes she is ugly – a belief reinforced by those around her –, and that it is her ugliness that prevents her from being loved, so she desperately wishes she could have blue eyes and thus become beautiful.

In a paper that discusses the notion of *ritualistic violence*, in which an entire community sacrifices a single victim as a scapegoat in order to achieve a purpose, Azevedo (2001) states that “the violence – physical or psychological – waged against the woman [is] a common denominator to all Morrison's novels” (p. 469). According to the author, in this procedure a victim must be sacrificed in order to correct a perceived social crisis; in the case of *The Bluest Eye*, it is the loss of

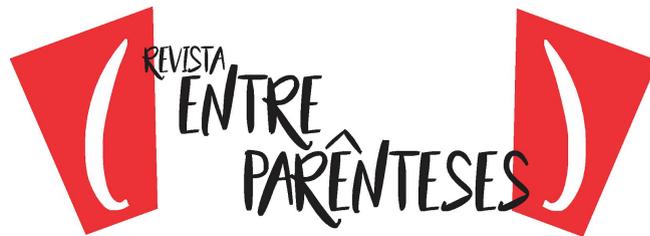


traditional black values in a community that suffers from the influence of the white majority and has internalized a learned self-hatred. A victim is then chosen as the single reason for the crisis – and his or her sacrifice in theory would bring the world back to order. A specific person is chosen as scapegoat because they have characteristics that are perceived as likely to cause problems, and Pecola Breedlove bears many signs, making her the perfect scapegoat:

She is dark, in a society that equates whiteness with beauty and virtue, and blackness with worthlessness; she is a female child in a strongly patriarchal society which discriminates women and children. As a Black child very few people, if any, would stand below her in the social scale (p. 475).

Pecola's family is comprised exclusively of outsiders, she is passive and does not react to anything that is done to her and, of course, she is both female and a child – which is no small detail. As explained by Azevedo, in a patriarchal society the “female members occupy the very lowest position on the social scale” (p. 470). Thus, blackness, infancy, and womanhood/girlhood are all signs of exclusion.

The notion of girls and women on the receiving end of continued violence is further explored by Roye (2012). Analyzing and comparing both Morrison's first novel – *The Bluest Eye* – and her latest one back in 2012 – *A Mercy* –, Roye demonstrates that both are stories about what she calls “aborted girlhoods”. The female characters of *A Mercy* – a black slave, a Native American servant, a white mistress – all live at a time when slavery was still allowed in the United States. The author argues that although what they go through is obviously different and that Rebekka, the white woman, has the privilege of race, they are all vulnerable *because* they are women living in a sexist world and fearing unwanted advances from men. Three centuries later, there are Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, who live in a post-slavery world. But Pecola is still not seen as much more than a servant, and in the MacTeer sisters it is still possible to find the same fear of unwanted sexual advances from



men, argues Royce. These are girls who are vulnerable, like their counterparts back in the seventeenth century.

For Pecola (and the MacTeer sisters as well), however, their experience is not only shaped by the fact that they are female; a variety of intricate oppressions – such as misogyny and racism – complement one another. Gillan (2002) discusses the idea of the *hyperembodied citizen* – someone who is not the norm and, therefore, is “outside the boundaries of full citizenship” (p. 283). The author explains that gender and race operate in this way. Children, of course, are people who have not yet achieved full citizenship, as they are yet coming of age and coming into being. Thus, when we think about Pecola, or Claudia or Frieda, it is important to remember that they are black, women, *and children* – far away from the disembodied white male that represents the standard citizen in the American society of the 1940s. This way, these girls are marked as “different” in three distinct ways.

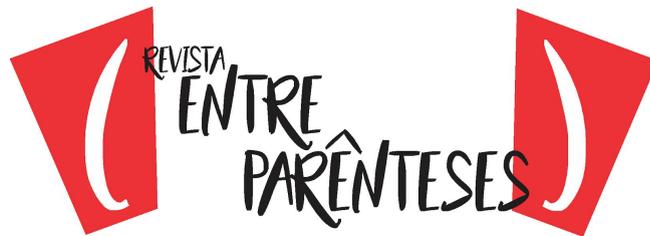
The text of the novel itself explicitly states that black children were the lowest people in the social hierarchy. When the third-person narrator talks about Aunt Jimmy and her circle of old female friends, he says that “Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders” (p. 138) – and this “everybody” covers white children, women and men, as well as black men. However, the narrator continues on the same paragraph: “The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other”. From this passage we can infer that, among the adults, black women were in the lowest possible position. And if black women were only over black children in the social scale, it is safe to conclude that being Black little girls were as low as one could get. Pecola, Claudia and Frieda are, then, occupying the lowest positions in the hierarchy; Pecola the lowest of them all, probably because she is poorer, and because she is not well integrated into the community, as Azevedo (2001) proposes in her article. In interviews, Morrison herself has discussed this notion of young black girls always occupying a peripheral space in literature: girls “who were props, background” (STROUSE apud ROSENBERG, 1987, p. 436), girls



who were “never taken seriously by anybody” (DUVALL apud ROYE, 2012, p. 212). Both of these issues appear in the novel.

The fact that the main characters of *The Bluest Eye* are both female *and* children has a direct influence on their actions and understanding of the world, and this is evident from the beginning of the narrative. There are two major parts in this novel, which are composed of smaller parts – we could call these smaller parts chapters. One of the major parts is comprised of several chapters which are prefaced by a passage from the *Dick and Jane* primers for young readers and told by an unidentified third-person narrator. Then there are four other chapters, which are named after the four seasons of the year and have a very clear narrator. In these four chapters, Claudia narrates a year in the girls’ lives – the year in which Pecola and her family were “put outdoors” after the father burned their house and the girl then moved in with the MacTeers temporarily; the year Pecola was raped by her father and got pregnant with his baby, a baby which she lost later on.

The time narrated, though, is different from the moment of the narration. This is clear, for example, when Claudia talks about the white dolls she got as (very special) Christmas gifts and wanted to destroy in order to understand what was it that made them – and white girls – so special. She says: “It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (p. 23). There are many moments in which the narrator discusses the way she was *then* – *then* she did not love Shirley Temple yet, *then* she was still in love with herself (p. 74), *then* she was still confident, not knowing her limitations (p. 191). When narrator-Claudia states that all of that was true back *then*, when she was a child, it is implied that at some point of her process of growing up all of that changed. Children learn from their surroundings, like Pecola learned from her parents – and from a very racist society – that she was ugly. Even though it is clear that Claudia never



experienced the amount of trauma that her friend did, she certainly went through an “educational process” (KLOTMAN, 1979, p. 125) of her own.

The educational process that children go through because they are still building their own identity and only beginning to understand a world in which they are not considered full citizens yet is one of the aspects of childhood that appear in *The Bluest Eye*. There are, however, many more – the following section is dedicated to discussing them.

2. ASPECTS OF CHILDHOOD AND THEIR INFLUENCE

Steven Mintz (2009) discusses the ways in which the cultural understanding of childhood has changed over time in America, always emphasizing that it has never been the same for all children, because every aspect of it is shaped by class, ethnicity, and gender, for example. The author reminds us that childhood is a social construct. The discussion about American children in general terms is possible, and Mintz does that, but it is important to keep in mind that affirmations are always generalizations and could not represent the exact truth for each and every child. In *The Bluest Eye* itself we can see that: even though Claudia and Pecola are both young girls living in the same community at the same time, and they are both black and part of the poor working class, their lives are undoubtedly different.

According to Mintz (2009), it was in the eighteenth century that adults started to see childhood as a part of life that needed to be sheltered, protected, kept at a distance from adult reality. He states, however, that “universalizing the modern ideal of a sheltered childhood was a highly uneven process and one that has never encompassed all American children” (p. 8). Mintz also states that childhood has never been “an age of innocence, at least not for the overwhelming majority of children. Childhood has never been insulated from the pressures and demands of the surrounding society” (p. 4).



Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, being very young children, are kept at a distance from adults. Claudia states: “Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information” (p. 10). And later: “We do not, cannot, know the meaning of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old” (p. 15). Adults do not talk to them, they do not help them understand the world – like Claudia says, they do not provide information. At the same time, the girls are not necessarily *sheltered*, because adults talk in front of them. When Claudia says that she and Frieda cannot always understand the meaning of their words, for example, their mother and other women from the neighborhood are discussing their new roomer, Mr. Henry, and his relationships with women – an adult matter. When the MacTeer girls find out that Pecola is pregnant, it is through the bits of conversations they hear in the houses of neighbors. They are invited to come into the houses, and the adults just talk in front of them. They are never invited to *join* any conversations, however. So they come up with their own interpretations of the situations around them.

It is the case of them witnessing girls first getting their periods and of the meanings they attribute to pregnancy and babies, for example. When Pecola menstruates for the first time, which happens during the brief period in which she is staying with the MacTeers, Frieda is the only one who understands what is happening. She explains it in very simple terms to the other girls: it meant that Pecola could “have a baby” (p. 28). The topic of menstruation comes up again when the three girls are with their widely beloved classmate Maureen Peal. Maureen actually calls it “menstrate” and seems slightly confused by how periods work.

After Pecola menstruates for the first time and finds out that she was from that moment on able to have a baby, she is curious regarding *how* to do it. Frieda explains to her that she needs someone to *love* her. Thus, they associate being pregnant with love, necessarily. When Pecola gets pregnant, they cannot fully grasp what it meant for an eleven-year-old to be pregnant and, more than that, that she had

been raped by her own father and was carrying his baby, conceived through violence. Claudia says: “the process of having a baby by any male was incomprehensible to us – at least she knew her father” (p. 190-191). And, thus, they decide to give up something precious to them (their seeds, their money, their hopes of getting a bicycle) in order to save Pecola’s baby. Unlike the adults around them, who say that” [Pecola] be lucky if it don’t live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking” (p. 189), the girls want to save the baby. They want that baby to be loved like all the white dolls and Shirley Temples of the world were, says Claudia.

Pecola and her brother Sammy, on the other hand, are not sheltered from adult reality at all – they hear their parents brutally fighting over and over again. Sammy runs away from home time after time, and Pecola feels “an overwhelming desire that [her parents] would kill the [each other], and a profound wish that she herself could die” (p. 43). Pecola even learns to feel a sense of responsibility for her family’s situation, believing that if she could have the blue eyes she wished for so vehemently – and consequently got to be beautiful –, maybe her parents would be different as well.

Mrs. and Mr. MacTeer may not be represented as incredibly affectionate parents, and the girls show a real fear of getting scolded by their mother in many different occasions (and she *does* scold them a few times), but they are clearly parents who worry and care about their children. Like Claudia says, when she remembers Autumn, she thinks of “somebody who does not want [her] to die” (p. 12), and her father is a “[w]olf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills” (p. 61). They grow up in a house where they know they are cared for, even if they also have a respect for their parents which sometimes borders on actual fear. They grow up in a house where they do not learn self-hatred, where they do not learn to feel worthless. Claudia grows up to eventually tell this story and to think deeply about the events that

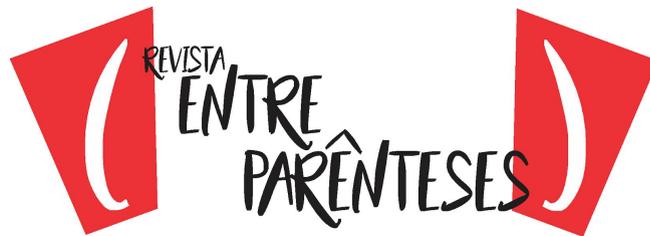


happened in that year, to think about the role the entire community (and the whole country) had in Pecola's destruction.

We learn that Pauline Breedlove taught her children “fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly's mother. [...] into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (p. 128). We learn that Cholly Breedlove had no idea how to establish any relationship with his children. While the MacTeers tell their daughters not to go knock on the doors of strangers when they are selling the seeds, not to go near the notorious prostitutes of the neighborhood, no one really cares what Pecola does. The girls ask her whether Mrs. Breedlove lets her go into the Maginot Line's house (one of the prostitutes), and Pecola says that she does not know that she goes there. While the MacTeer girls mention being afraid of running into Soaphead Church, the pedophile that lives close by, Pecola goes willingly into his house in order to ask for his help in order to get blue eyes.

It is also interesting to notice that, as mentioned by Mintz (2009), “during the eighteenth century, a shift in parental attitudes took place. Fewer parents expected children to bow or doff their hats in their presence or stand during meals. Instead of addressing parents as ‘sir’ and ‘madam,’ children called them ‘papa’ and ‘mama.’” (p. 15). This cultural change happened more or less at the same time when society started seeing children as people living a separate stage of life, no longer “adults in training” they were considered to be before. Claudia and Frieda call their parents “mama” and “daddy” among themselves (sometimes addressing their mother as “ma’am”), but Pecola calls her mother “Mrs. Breedlove”, which shows the complete distance there is between daughter and mother.

Another aspect of these girls' childhoods that is visible throughout the novel is that their first reaction to every problem that comes their way is to always try to solve it on their own. Adults do not talk to them, Claudia tells us very early in her narration, and she also states that she and Frieda, being children, never initiated talk



with them as well. They only *answered to* the grown-ups. So they probably felt like they were in no position to ask questions.

The fact that young children did not initiate conversations with adults is combined with two other aspects within the novel. One, that all of them are afraid of their mothers. When Pecola menstruates and Frieda is trying to help her, for example, the latter tells Claudia: “be quiet, or Mama will hear you” (p. 28). When Frieda is molested by the roomer and is crying in her room, Claudia assumes the whole time that their mother had whipped her at some point. And they try to deal with everything on their own on both occasions. They try to help Pecola and clean the spots of blood on their own until their neighbor Rosemary sees everything and tells Mrs. Macteer that the girls were “playing nasty” (p. 30). When Frieda is molested and says she is afraid of “being ruined”, despite both sisters not knowing for sure what exactly that meant, they decide to do something in order to stop it from becoming true. In Claudia’s mind, *it* means getting big and fat like the prostitute Maginot Line – she suggests that Frieda could “exercise and not eat” (p. 101). They realize that the solution to the problem is drinking whiskey, like the prostitutes do, and they decide to look for it in Pecola’s house, since her father was always drunk.

The second aspect is that usually the first reaction adults have when something happens to the children is to scold them. When the girls are accused of “playing nasty” by their neighbor, they all get a whipping, in spite of their protests. Of course, once Mrs. MacTeer realizes what was actually happening, she immediately starts to help Pecola. She does not apologize, but Claudia (who said in the beginning that they did not hear the words adults spoke, but rather *looked at* and *listened* to them) states that “her eyes were sorry” (p. 31). When Claudia destroys the white dolls she gets as gifts, there is actually a very profound reason behind it, even if she does not fully comprehend it yet. Understandably, though, the grown-ups reprehend her for not taking care of the special gifts that were given to her. But Claudia, also understandably, complains: “nobody ever asked me what I wanted for

Christmas. Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want anything to own, or to possess any object” (p. 21). The third-person narrator also mentions, later on when talking about Cholly’s personal history, that adults “treated him like the child he was, never engaging into serious conversation” (p. 140). That silence was part of being a child.

Another aspect that appears in Claudia’s narration and is very typical of children – especially of the youngest child in any group, which is her case – are her constant complaints about being the last one to get do things. When Pecola menstruates and Frieda is the only one who understands what is going on, the latter is the one who manages the situation, giving orders to Claudia, who is not included in what is happening. Claudia does not like it, even if she does not know for sure what it is that she is missing.

They headed for the side of the house where the bushes were thick.
“Hey. What about me? I want to go.”
“Shut uuuup,” Frieda stage-whispered. “Mama will hear you. You wash the steps.”
They disappeared around the corner of the house. I was going to miss something. Again. Here was something important, and I had to stay behind and not see any of it. (p. 29).

Something similar happens when Frieda, who is very upset at the occasion, tells Claudia that Mr. Henry had touched her. Claudia has a childish curiosity about it, asking how it felt and was it not supposed to feel good; she says, looking at her chest, that she was never going to have anything there. Frieda first states that Claudia was always jealous, then asks, seeming incredulous, if Claudia *wanted* the same thing to happen to her. To which the latter answers: “No, I just get tired of having everything last” (p. 100). She is too young to understand what happened; what she knows is that she is often not included in things that she wants to participate in – probably simply *because* she cannot participate.



These are some of the ways in which being children shapes the experiences of Claudia, Frieda and Pecola – in different ways because they live in households with different family arrangements, which has an impact in their lives and sense of well-being. There are, furthermore, aspects of their lives which are shaped by the fact that they are not only children but also *girls*. This is what will be discussed in the next section.

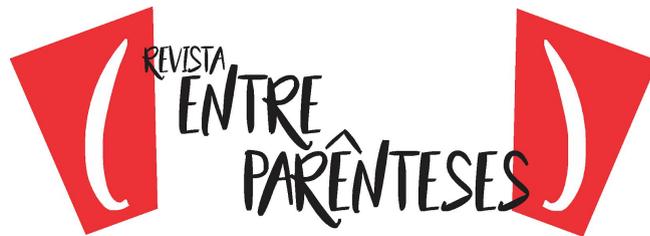
3. HOW GIRLHOOD SHAPES THEIR EXPERIENCES

In their paper, McNair and Brooks (2012) analyze the representation of African American girlhood in transitional chapter books written by black female authors and about young girls. Transitional chapter books are aimed at readers who are still developing their reading abilities (from ages eight to eleven) and, thus, are still initiating their contact with literature. The authors demonstrate that the narratives analyzed in their research present recurrent themes “such as resisting dominant beauty standards, developing sisterhood bonds and friendships, and (re)defining gender and sexual identity” (p. 568). They argue that, starting from the 1970’s, African American authors have been working on rewriting black womanhood, and that something similar is done by the authors of the transitional chapter books they analyze. All of the recurrent themes identified by McNair and Brooks are present in some level in *The Bluest Eye*.

The development of friendship bonds and the emotional support provided by them, which is explored by McNair and Brooks in their article, is very present in *The Bluest Eye*. The authors also state that it is when they create these friendship bonds that children develop moral understanding and sensitivity (DUNN, 2004 apud MCNAIR; BROOKS, 2012). Frieda and Claudia are very close with each other; they are of similar ages and have similar experiences – they are always there to support each other in times of need, like when Claudia gets sick or when Pecola is molested

and is afraid of being ruined. So they try to extend this feeling of security and support to Pecola as soon as she arrives in their house to live there temporarily: “We had fun in those few days Pecola was with us. Frieda and I stopped fighting each other and concentrated on our guest, trying hard to keep her from feeling outdoors” (p. 18-19) – feeling outdoors being the real terror in life, as Claudia puts it. When their mother exhaustively complains about Pecola’s excessive drinking of milk, the MacTeer sisters feel “ashamed of the insults that were being heaped on [their] friend” (p. 24). When Pecola, who was always the only child to always sit alone in school and was always made fun of, is being bullied by a group of boys after class, Frieda rapidly intervenes, even if she and Claudia were afraid themselves that the boys would then proceed to bully *them*. The girls are there to defend a friend in a time of need, putting her well-being over their own. Because they are children, it is also very moving that by the end of the novel they decide to give up their hopes of getting a new bicycle in order to make a “deal” with God so Pecola’s baby could be saved. McNair and Brooks, quoting Collins (2010), bring to their analysis the idea that black female writers see the importance of the relationships that black women establish with each other. This is present in *The Bluest Eye*. There is a passage in which a young boy with violent tendencies, Junior, who enjoys picking at girls, thinks: “The nigger girls he did not pick on very much. They usually traveled in packs, and once when he threw a stone at some of them, they chased, caught and beat him witless.” (p. 87-88)

As a young girl, Claudia also tries to resist the dominating beauty standards imposed on her, which were so destructive for both Pauline and Pecola, who are part of different generations. But she is still young (the youngest of the girls), so, as she states herself, back then she had yet to develop a sense of vanity. By then she was still comfortable in her own skin. When she meets Maureen Peal, a much-beloved classmate who has lighter skin, and the latter affirms that she, Maureen, *is* cute and the other girls are ugly, Claudia starts to think about beauty.



And she questions the widespread ideas about it: “What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?” (p. 74).

The same sense of resistance appears when she tears the white dolls apart. Jacobs (2008) describes dolls as being “a ubiquitous feature of American girlhood” (p. 321). The author explains that in the Progressive Era (the period that preceded the time in which the novel is set), white middle-class women saw a didactic purpose in dolls: they should teach little girls maternal and domestic skills. Jacobs states that dolls were seen as a vehicle to teach girls about health and hygiene and to bring middle-class values to the poor (FORMANEK-BRUNELL, 1993 apud JACOBS, 2008). Like the Indian girls examined by Jacobs in her study, Claudia refused to passively receive those values and ideas: “What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. [...] Motherhood was old age, and other remote possibilities” (p. 20). Her only interest in the dolls was in dismembering and destroying them in order to understand what was it that made them so beautiful, so cute, so widely adored by everyone. This is an aspect of childhood that was specific to girls. Boys were not presented with dolls that never looked like them nor were they supposed to be their pretend-fathers; they were not presented with toys that were “cute” or representative of society’s beauty standards.

Beauty standards are very important for these girls because for girls the idea of love and being loved is connected with beauty from a very early age. Roye (2012) states that “[Pecola’s brother] Sammy dreams of escaping his horrible home-life and finally does. This is not a viable option for a female child like Pecola, whose dream is to vanish or to somehow magically acquire blue eyes, which, she thinks, will make her more lovable” (p. 219). Pecola learns from the culture that surrounds her that white skin, blond curls, and blue eyes mean beauty – because Shirley Temple and little girls who looked like her were considered the cutest things in the world. In a way, it is like her mother, who learned from the movies that she was



not beautiful. When Pauline loses a tooth, she loses all hopes of ever being beautiful – beautiful meaning, of course, looking as much as possible like the women she saw on the movie screens. But Pecola also learns that she is not beautiful from her own peers. In school, mockingly telling a boy that he loved Pecola Breedlove was a way to be “particularly insulting to a boy” (p. 46). So Pecola thoroughly believes that if she could have a pair of blue eyes her life would be better – maybe even her parents would be different.

And Pecola wants to be loved, of course. When Frieda tells her that for her to have baby someone has to love her first, Pecola asks the MacTeer sisters: “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get someone to love you?” (p. 32) – a question which had never crossed Claudia’s mind before, but that she does not know how to answer. When Pecola is visiting the prostitutes, she asks Miss Marie twice how she managed to get so many boyfriends. The second time, she adds: “How come they all love you?” (p. 53). And as Marie tells her a story about a man named Dewey, Pecola wonders about love: what did it feel like? She has no love at home, and the idea of ever being loved is something that she simply cannot grasp.

Another aspect of these girls’ lives that is very present is the constant unwanted sexual advances that come from all around them. They are never safe, anywhere, including in their own houses. Mintz (2009) states that “[Alfred Kinsey’s] interviews indicated that exhibitionists had exposed themselves in front of 12 percent of pre-adolescent girls and that 9 percent of the girls had had their genitals fondled” (p. 19). The first of these situations is implied in the narrative (though not necessarily as happening to any of the three girls, but to *some* girl in the past) and the second one is actually depicted. This is the dialogue that happens when Frieda tells Claudia what Mr. Henry did to her:

“He... picked at me.”
“Picked at you? You mean like Soaphead Church?”
“Sort of.”
“He showed his privates at you?”



“Noooo. He touched me.” (p. 99).

Thus, we know that Soaphead Church, the man Claudia is afraid of running into earlier on, exposes himself in front of someone. Later when, we have access to a letter he wrote to God, in which he openly admits what he did to little girls: “I gave them mints, money, and they’d eat ice cream with their legs open while I played with them” (p. 181). Frieda is molested inside her own house by a man put there by her parents. And then there is Pecola, of course, who not only is raped inside her home but is raped by her own father. After that, she does not find any understanding adults ready help her. Her mother beats her up. The neighbors gossip about it. The voices that help Claudia and Frieda put together the story of what happened are the indistinct voices of neighbors, but someone (and it might be more than just one person, since the fragments of conversation are just a sample of what the girls hear) suggests: “She carry some of the blame. [...] How come she didn’t fight him?” (p. 189). This is victim-blaming working at its best, very common with victims of rape. Even when someone else tries to remind the first person that Pecola was not “twelve or so”, they seem unconvinced that she had no responsibility in what happened to her.

The young girls represented in *The Bluest Eye* could be considered, therefore, doubly vulnerable. Their young age makes them vulnerable in a society that does not pay too much attention to them, and their gender makes them much more susceptible to the pressures of beauty standards and, even worse, puts them at risk around strange men (which is not to say that both of these things did not happen to young boys). The particular trio of girls which are the focus of this narrative is made more vulnerable, of course, because they are black girls living in a racist society.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS



In this paper, I tried to demonstrate how being girls (thus, both female and children) influences Claudia, Frieda and Pecola's lives, actions and understanding of the world and of the various situations they experience (or vicariously experience). Roye (2012) states that "[b]y writing about creatures in whose fate nobody takes interest, the author is deliberately bringing marginal figures to the center of attention, thereby rescuing them and their tragic tales from a willful collective blindness and amnesia" (p. 224). In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia shows us time and time again how marginal was the position they occupied in the big scheme of things. She shows us how Pecola's tragic story of emotional and sexual abuse, which ultimately led to the loss of her sanity, interested people only vaguely. Pecola was merely another topic of kitchen gossip, and her story is made even crueler by that.

These little girls occupy the lowest position in the social hierarchy, and they are supposed to be deferential to absolutely everyone. They are not in a position to initiate conversation, and they are not taken seriously if they ever try, so they attempt to solve their problems on their own. As Claudia puts it: "Nobody paid attention to us, so we paid very good attention to ourselves" (p. 191). Their solutions, however, often prove to be very inefficient – since adults do not talk to them, they lack the knowledge or experience necessary to act in an effective way.

These little girls often find themselves tiptoeing around other people. Claudia and Frieda constantly try to do things behind their mother's back because they are afraid of being scolded or beaten up (and not completely without reason, since their mother's first reaction always seems to be to scold them, even if it is clear that she cared about her children). They fear running into a well-known pedophile that lives in the neighborhood. They fear that they themselves would become the victims of the bullying of the schoolboys if they tried to help a friend. And yet their sense of solidarity to each other is strong – so they defend Pecola from those boys, they help Pecola with her menstruation, Claudia goes with her sister on a pursuit of whiskey so Frieda is not "ruined".



As children, they absorb much from their surroundings. They learn that they are not beautiful – some of them believe it, some of them question it and try to resist it. Pecola believes it so much that she links that belief to the lack of love she experiences, something which causes much anxiety in her. If Claudia realizes that she, like Pecola, does not know the answer to the question about how to make someone love them, she says that she had never thought about that before. Her parents may not know how to express that love in words, but deep down she understands how real it is. Therefore, that is not something that she worries about. The girls' backgrounds, their family structures, inform who they are – and who they later become.

Choosing to tell the stories of young girls was not a random choice made by Toni Morrison. These stories are what they are *because* their protagonists are who they are: young, female, Black, poor. The lowest members of the social scale, who – in different ways, it is true – have to look after themselves and each other in a world that too often resists them. Sadly, for every Claudia who thrives despite everything that is against her, there is a Pecola, for whom it is “much, much, much too late” (MORRISON, 1994, p. 206).

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