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YEARNING FOR BEAUTY.

## THE EXPRESSION OF MELANCHOLY IN TONI MORRISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE"

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Published in 1970 (Klotman 123), *The Bluest Eye* is the first novel by Toni Morrison. It has introduced the theme of African American trauma, which remains prevalent in all the author's texts. Nevertheless, the writer does not provide solutions to social problems. She attempts to clarify them and present the depth of human mind that suffers continually. What is more, in spite of dealing mainly with one specific group, Toni Morrison renders universal messages. Conner (XXII) claims that "her position is double-voiced: it has a cultural specificity that resists interpretation outside of African American culture and yet it has a universality that speaks to all people." *The Bluest Eye* revolves around traumatic melancholy, which results from the feeling of absence that is common to all cultures (LaCapra 700). The

universality of absence, however, seems to be combined with the situation specific to the black population. The novel starts in 1940s in Lorain, Ohio and it represents the lives of two African American families, i.e. the McTeers and the Breedloves, but the author focuses on the children. Claudia McTeer, who is the narrator of the novel, and her sister Frieda do not experience parental love directly. The girl, for example, assumes that “when they trip and fall down the parents glance at them; if they cut or bruise themselves, the parents ask them are they crazy; when they catch colds, the parents shake their heads in disgust at the lack of consideration” (Morrison 10). Although they are often scolded and subordinated as the narrator hints that “adults do not talk to them – they just give directions and issue orders” (Morrison 10), the McTeer girls soon realize that it may be the way in which the parents express concern. In addition, they struggle not to pay attention to racial discrimination that African American people have to face on everyday basis. It may be admitted that both factors give them much strength to survive. The situation is different in case of Pecola Breedlove. Unable to cope with the reality, the heroine immerses into her imagination and begins to dream of acquiring unattainable blue eyes, which symbolize white features as well as the prevailing beauty model.

In his article entitled *Trauma, Absence, Loss*, LaCapra analyzes the differences between absence and loss. Although the distinction is not binary and it tends to collapse, one can distinguish a few features (LaCapra 699-700). Loss can be located at one particular point in time and it refers to one specific event. The examples include the death of a close relative or the loss caused by Holocaust. Moreover, loss involves certain objects that the individual wants to regain. Absence, in contrast, does not result from one particular event and it does not refer to specific objects. This is the reason why the narratives dealing with absence are often fragmented, chaotic and abstract (LaCapra 701). Loss, unlike absence, can be mourned and, thus, worked through. The nature of loss makes it possible to learn how to distinguish between the reality and imagination, which constitutes the fundamental element of the treatment. Absence leads to acting-out and melancholy rather than working-through. Since there is no object to mourn and no particular event, one may lose the ability to cope with the reality. LaCapra (713) claims that absence results in “melancholy that is characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating and traumatized person, locked in compulsive repetition, remains possessed by the imagination.” The scholar also suggests that absence might be worked through only if converted into loss. The same happens with anxiety, which can be defined as a fear that does not refer to any object (LaCapra 707). In both cases, one must find the object in order to overcome the negative emotions.

The main difference between absence and loss refers to the sources. In case of Pecola, the U.S. education system aimed at promoting white Americans contributes substantially to her feeling of absence and, gradually, melancholy. The novel opens with the three versions of “Dick and Jane” primer, which was common in American schools then:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play (Morrison 3).

The versions of the textbook repeat the same message, but they look differently. The original one is written in Standard English. The second version does not include capital letters and punctuation, whereas the third one ignores even the spaces between the words. According to Klotman (123), the author uses the technique in order to juxtapose the promoted model of white American families with the harsh reality of African Americans. The version rendered in Standard English symbolizes white Americans that lead the so-called *exemplary* lifestyle. The text without capital letters and punctuation stands for the McTeers, who are poor and discriminated, but they struggle to survive and provide for the children. The third version represents the Breedloves and Pecola that “lives in a misshapen world which destroys her” (Klotman 123). What is more, the primer seems to ignore the history of racial persecution, which suggests that the U.S. education system avoids such subjects as conquest or slavery. It is preferred to “treat American childhood as an abstraction that excludes all but white middle-class children” (Werrlein 58). The image presented in “Dick and Jane” textbook influences the teachers as well as the pupils in *The Bluest Eye*. As the result, Pecola, whose family does not have much in common with the promoted model, becomes stigmatized. The heroine is contrasted with Maureen Peal, i.e. a white girl who “is rich and swaddles in comfort or care” (Morrison 62). The narrator emphasizes discrimination that Pecola has to face at school by presenting Maureen in the following way:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria – they flocked to the table of her choice, where she opened fastidious lunches (Morrison 62-63).

Apart from the lack of acceptance at school, the girl is abandoned by the mother. Pauline Breedlove starts to serve the Fishers, who are a typical white American family, and she soon realizes that “a servant wields far more power than a black mother” (Werrlein 61). The woman spends all her time and energy on housekeeping. It makes Pauline “neglect the house and the children more and more – they are like afterthoughts one has before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that make the daily life with the Fishers lighter, delicate, more lovely” (Morrison 127). Such an approach teaches the child that blackness prevents her even from feeling parental concern. The deteriorating relationship between Pecola and her mother is hinted by the fact that the girl’s name comes from a popular movie entitled *Imitation of Life* (Rosenberg 440). Maureen Peal explains to the heroine that “in the picture show, there is a mulatto teenager who hates her mother because she is black and ugly” (Morrison 67). In *The Bluest Eye*, the situation is rather reversed. One may assume that Pauline expresses hatred toward Pecola. Since the daughter does not fit the white beauty model, which the woman admires, she refuses to focus on her needs. The only relative who seems to care about the heroine is her father, i.e. Cholly Breedlove. Nevertheless, the man suffered from oppression in the past and he “reproduces degradation within the family unit” (Werrlein 61). Cholly rapes the girl one Sunday afternoon and leaves her unconscious on the kitchen floor. The death of the infant who is born as the result of this crime emphasizes the tragic consequences of slavery and racial discrimination.

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Pecola’s peers are fascinated with the white beauty model as well. Not only are they taught at school that African Americans should be ignored, but also they receive a similar message from the mass culture. The promotion of white features is suggested by “the endless reproduction of the images of feminine beauty in everyday objects and consumer goods: white baby dolls with their inhumanly hard bodies and uncanny blue eyes, Shirley Temple cups and Mary Jane candies” (Kuenz 422). The heroine, who does not meet the expectations of the community, begins to be ostracized. One may claim that the girl’s exclusion is hinted by the behavior of the whores, who live in the same house as the Breedloves. The women “do not acknowledge Pecola’s presence and talk over and around her, which, in the Black English oral tradition, signifies the *otherness*” (Atkinson 17). As the result, Pecola starts to see herself in the body of a white teenager. She dreams of becoming similar to the white baby dolls with blue eyes. The narrator states that the heroine “each night, without fail, prays for blue eyes; fervently, for a year she has prayed; although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope” (Morrison 46). Since it seems impossible for an African American person to acquire blue eyes, the readers can observe the growing contrast between the reality and the girl’s imagination. According to Stern (86), there is

one more character who loses the ability to differentiate between the external and the imagined effect. One of the whores, i.e. China, creates numerous odd hairstyles and make-ups. The woman, however, believes that she looks attractively. Both cases present the detrimental impact that the society has on the citizens who do not fit the prevailing beauty model or the social roles.

Assured by the education system that white people are better, abandoned by the mother and stigmatized by the peers, Pecola cannot endure the absence of white features, which are symbolized by blue eyes. Mourning and, thus, working-through does not seem possible in this case because the absence might not be converted into loss. The blue eyes do not stand for one particular object, but a whole range of features that constitute the *exemplary* appearance. One could even admit that the heroine's dream concerns much more than the acquisition of white characteristics. The girl strives to become loved or accepted and she believes that whiteness will lead her to happiness. What is more, Pecola's plight does not result from one particular event. Since the heroine is the victim of repetitive persecution, it may be impossible to point the situation which has traumatized her. In the course of the novel, the girl begins to suffer from melancholy. She compulsively repeats the desire and cannot distinguish between the reality and imagination. Mentioning white features and unnaturally blue eyes emphasizes the fact that imagination has possessed Pecola. Even God is presented as a typical white person. The narrator claims that "God is a nice old white men, with long white hair, flowing white beard and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad" (Morrison 134). Focused on her primary desire, the girl meets Soaphead Church, i.e. a faithhealer, who promises the blue eyes to Pecola, but the price is mental health. The heroine loses the ability to cope with the reality completely. She wanders around the neighborhood and talks about her blue eyes that nobody else can notice. Finally, overwhelmed by insanity, "Pecola spends her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear; elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal effort to fly" (Morrison 204). Apart from proving that absence may not be converted into mental toughness, *The Bluest Eye* includes a tragic message for all African American people. It suggests that passing as white may not be enough because it does not compensate for blackness. By presenting the girl, who becomes gradually excluded by the community, the author leaves hardly any hope for African Americans.

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## SUMMARY

**Yearning for Beauty. The Expression of Melancholy in Toni Morrison’s  
“The Bluest Eye”**

The purpose of the paper is to discuss the sources and results of melancholy in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* with reference to Dominick LaCapra’s theory based on a distinction between loss and absence. LaCapra claims that the former concept refers to a particular event, while the latter cannot be identified with any specific point in time or object. What is more, LaCapra admits that absence may result in melancholy, i.e. the state in which the individual remains possessed by a negative emotion because there is no possibility of working it through. The idea of absence causing melancholy is exemplified by the protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove. The girl dreams about acquiring blue eyes that belong to the prevailing white model of beauty which excludes African-American features. The feeling of absence is intensified by the U.S. education system aimed at promoting the lifestyle and characteristics of white Americans, her own mother who prefers serving white people to taking care of her own children, and the peers that constantly stigmatize Pecola for ugliness. Consequently, she becomes obsessed with the unattainable blue eyes. Since there is no chance for her to be accepted and thus cope with the absence of white features, the girl suffers from melancholy which leads her to insanity and exclusion from society.

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## KEYWORDS

Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, trauma studies, absence, loss, melancholy

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