

Natural Imagery in The Bluest Eye

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Abstract: In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison, an African American female writer, uses a host of natural images and motifs to create characters and reveal the theme. This study explores the symbolization of natural imagery and its functions to demonstrate its malevolent force and ironic artistic effect. The post-colonial theory is adopted to discuss black identity. The analysis may shed some light on the understanding of racial discrimination of whites against blacks as well as the spiritual distortion of the blacks.

Keywords: Toni Morrison; *The Bluest Eye*; Natural imagery; Symbolization

Introduction

Natural imagery in literature usually conveys abstract meanings and profound connotations. This study investigates the use of natural images and their functions according to symbolism as an artistic expression. The natural imagery in *The Bluest Eye* is more of a malevolent than a benevolent presence and expresses the irony of the fact that people's good wishes and an idyllic world will never materialize. The post-colonial theory is adopted to explain Pecola's responses to her ethnic identity. The rest of the paper is organized as follows: Chapter I discusses the seasons; Chapter II focuses on dandelions and marigolds; and Chapter III deals with birds, cats, and dogs.

1 Seasons

The novel is framed by four seasons to express the characters' miseries. The movement from spring to winter shows a normal life trajectory, but the story begins with autumn and ends with summer to symbolize a disordered life. The reversed seasonal order also suggests the psychological distortion of the blacks which led to their spiritual predicament given the mainstream cultural values in American society.

Autumn is the time of harvest and a reminder of the great hardship of the poor girl, Pecola. She had a stillborn baby (an event which caused her great physical and mental harm) and began to suffer from a white-dominated society in autumn. She was despised by the white store-keeper in a small grocery store simply for being black. Even under that bias, the innocent girl still prayed for blue eyes and believed that blue-eyed people are prettiest. Unfortunately, she was doomed to fail.

Winter symbolizes obstacles and coldness. To Claudia, "winter tightened our heads", and "we put pepper in the feet of our stockings" ^[1] for warmth. At that time, Pecola was harassed by a group of boys and called "black e mo" ^[2] at school. By contrast, Maureen, a light-skinned girl, was considered enchanting and welcomed. "Black boys didn't trip her" ^[3], black girls were jealous of her, and she felt superior to other black girls. Maureen suggests irony and exemplifies a certain internal racial discrimination among the black which turns the ethnic hatred imposed by mainstream American values into violence against their fellows.

Spring embodies rebirth and renewal but reminds Pecola of the beating from her mother and her rape by her father. Mrs. Breedlove abused her but took good care of the little white girl whose family employed her as a maid. Drunken Cholly raped Pecola as she washed dishes. The first humiliating sexual experience of Cholly with Darlene was witnessed by two white men and he was forced to proceed. That event warped his mind and triggered the incestuous rape. Cholly's aunt, Jimmy, who raised him since he was abandoned by his parents at a very early age "died of peach cobbler" ^[4] in a very chilly spring. For Claudia, spring was full of "the remembered ache of switchings," and "there were these new green switches that lost their sting after the whipping was over." ^[5]

Summer also indicates the tragic finale of Pecola who became insane given her baby's death and the neighborhood gossips. In dreamland, she had her appealing blue eyes. In fact, Pecola was isolated and struggled to find her self-identity, just like most blacks. Pecola's family finally broke: "Sammy left town long ago; Cholly died in the workhouse;" ^[6] and she and her mother lived in a little house on the edge of town. Family was the origin of her misery and she no longer had a home after it collapsed.

2 Dandelions and Marigolds

Flowers revealed the characters' subtle feelings and the theme. Dandelions and marigolds are crucial in framing the novel's structure and exploring its profound connotations. Pecola's initial love for dandelions suggest her sympathy for herself. After the grocery store incident, her attitude changed and she thought of dandelions as ugly and mere weeds. Having suffered from malevolence, Pecola became hostile toward dandelions just like other people because she denied herself and tolerated such racial discrimination.

Using post-colonial theory to analyze Pecola's responses to her identity reveals that she suffered in silence without resistance

amid racial prejudice, and her sense of identity faded in the white-dominated society where blacks still had lower social status than whites and the discrimination against blacks persisted beyond the abolition of slavery.

By contrast, Claudia and Frieda are within black traditional culture and have quite different characteristics. The girls never yielded to unfairness but revolted bravely, and their support helped Pecola endure hard times. The two sisters unreservedly hit back when Pecola was insulted by Maureen and other students, and they sincerely prayed when Pecola became pregnant, dropping marigold seeds for the safety of her baby.

In the postcolonial period, the sense of identity of the young black generation was interconnected with the existence of their nation and its meaning.^[7] In this novel, Morrison asks the blacks to fight for their equal rights in a white-dominated society and for the establishment of a national self-confidence within adherence to its culture.

In some western cultures, pure marigolds are named after the Virgin Mary and represent the constant renewal of nature. Pecola was ruined by her father's guilt. Frieda and Claudia dropped marigold seeds "just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt"^[8]. The marigold seed also symbolizes the guilty creature—the combination of Pecola and her father.

At first, Claudia and Frieda believed the marigolds did not grow because Pecola was childing. None of the seeds sprouted that year, symbolizing the dilemma of black people and implying that Pecola's dream would not actualize owing to the suppression. By the end of the story, Claudia thought that "the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" and "when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live."^[9] The end acts in line with the beginning by disclosing the origin of Pecola's tragedy: not a single root but the racial discrimination and cultural colonization of the whole society which forced blacks to dream of having blue eyes and to suffer from distorted minds.

3 Birds, Cats, and Dogs

Animals represent characters' psychological changes, the differences between the lives of black and white families, at the torture Pecola suffered given people's dissatisfaction with reality and the religious and moral colonization of the dominant culture.

Birds traditionally symbolize freedom. After hearing "I am cute! And you ugly!" from Maureen, Pecola "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing."^[10] The words elicited shame about her skin color. After losing dignity and confidence, she was like a bird that cannot fly with a pleated wing. Claudia later described Pecola as "a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach".^[11] Like a sick bird yearning for a blue sky, Pecola dreamed of being blue-eyed and tried her best to seek self-identity in a white-dominated society, struggling with the edge of the society although she had always been excluded.

The foreword describes a loving family as amiable people living together blithely in a good-looking house where the cat and dog get on well with family members. This portrait suggests an ideal white family, which definitely differs from Pecola's. Even the lives of pets are better than hers, an irony to show the miserable lives of the Breedloves.

Geraldine, Junior's mother, trusted colored people, and niggers were diverse and forbade Junior from playing with black boys. Junior gradually disobeyed them. He seduced Pecola into playing with the kitten and lied about Pecola killing the cat. The racism and class ideology imposed by his mother led to his hatred and oppression of Pecola, a scapegoat. The pastor also urged Pecola to kill a dog which is used to "disclose the hypocrisy and deceit of religion"^[12]. Pecola was oppressed by the religious standards that demanded tenderness and tolerance. Mainstream culture also invaded the black nation through the colonization of religion and morality.

The cats and dogs express criticism of social coldness and callousness. Instead of consoling Pecola, people gleefully tricked her and selfishly blamed her for their misfortunes and the racial discriminations they endured.

Conclusion

Natural imagery in *The Bluest Eye* represents mental activities and reveals the theme of exploring the spiritual predicament and survival plight of blacks. The combination of many factors, including natural and social environments and the prejudice of different people, caused the tragedy of the blacks. The symbolization of natural imagery as a malevolent rather than a benevolent presence also serves as the embodiment of those origins. Natural images are the clues which marry the thoughts of the black nation and the ironic artistic effect.

References:

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