

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENTS AND  
BLACK FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN THE NOVEL *THE BLUEST EYE*,  
BY TONI MORRISON: AN INTERSECTIONAL ANALYSIS OF PECOLA  
BREEDLOVE'S TRAJECTORY**

*A relação entre os espaços físicos e a representação feminina negra no romance “O Olho Mais Azul”, de Toni Morrison: uma análise interseccional da trajetória de Pecola Breedlove*

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**Abstract**

The novel *The Bluest Eye*, written by Toni Morrison, delves into various aspects, including the issues of racial segregation and violence against African-American women. This article aims to analyze the representation of space in the novel, particularly focusing on how the character Pecola Breedlove is portrayed within these environments. Additionally, it seeks to explore how these spaces are configured as both places of topophilia and topophobia. The findings indicate that inhospitable environments profoundly affect the protagonist physically and emotionally. This condition reflects the complex intersectional conflicts involving gender, race and sex, which significantly contribute to Pecola Breedlove's self-loathing process.

**Resumo**

O romance *O Olho Mais Azul*, de Toni Morrison, aborda, dentre outros aspectos, a questão da segregação racial e da violência contra a mulher afrodescendente norte-americana. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar a representação do espaço no referido romance, observando como a personagem Pecola Breedlove se insere em tais ambientes, indicando, ao mesmo tempo, de que modo eles se configuram como espaços topofílicos e topofóbicos. Os resultados indicam que aqueles que são inóspitos afetam a protagonista emocionalmente e que tal condição é reflexo do conflito interseccional que envolve gênero, raça e sexo, contribuindo para o processo de autoaversão de Pecola Breedlove.

**Keywords:** *The Bluest Eye; Toni Morrison; Topoanalysis.*

**Palavras-chave:** *O Olho Mais Azul; Toni Morrison.; Topoanálise.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of *Black Feminism* in the United States between the 1970s and 1980s was marked by the desire for the autonomy and emancipation of black women. At first black women rejected sexism and chose racism as their battle flag. Activists fought for visibility within the movement itself, as Almeida (2014, p. 3) observes:

In 1981, Angela Davis, in the classic *Woman, Race & Class*, highlights that the meaning of emancipation for black women differs from those attributed by current approaches in liberal bourgeois feminism, which conceives the experiences of white women as a model.

In those decades black women were silenced as they struggled against stereotypes/problems of racism and sexism. Their struggle was, in fact, in opposition to the Eurocentric feminist discourse, to the practices of socialist feminism and to the stereotypes created regarding black women. Almeida (2014, p. 3) highlights some of these misinterpretations:

First, the stereotypes that relate the body as a sexual object. Second, the stereotypes that attribute an atavistic domesticity to the body of black women. Third, the stereotypes that refer to the way black women relate to racist practices.

Several studies, including Almeida (2014) and Lage (2013), show the ideals of *Black Feminism* can be found in the literary works of North American black female writers in the 1970s, who built their narratives with a focus on problems of class, race, and gender. According to Almeida (2014, p. 4), Alice Walker, Pat Parkers, Rebecca Walker, and Toni Morrison stand out among those who raised the flag of racism and who undermined the boundaries between speculative reflection, aesthetics, and politics.

In the works of such authors, mothers, houses, and gardens are recurrent. To quote Giraudo (1997), “history, for African American women, is conceived along the lines of their mothers’ lives” [...] and so much “the house, like the garden, is a privileged space in which Afro-American women experience history and produce *herstory*” (GIRAUDO, 1997, p. 64-65). According to Hamilton (2020, p. 32), Alice Walker, in her 1994 collection *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*,

shows us how black mothers have built, through their creativity, cozy homes for the family, true refuges from the racist patriarchal world. She deconstructs the stereotype of bad black mothers, showing that despite the abuse and oppression they suffer in (post) slavery society, they were able to transform dilapidated and decrepit homes into homes filled with

affection and spaces of liberation. The writer presents the case of her own mother who, despite working hard in the fields alongside her father, knitted artistic blankets to protect her family against the cold. The mother cultivated beautiful gardens with “sunflowers that literally covered the holes in our walls” (Alice Walker, p. 408). Walker claims that, because of her mother’s creativity, her memory of poverty goes back to the bloom of sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, and verbena.

This article will analyze the physical environments in the novel *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison, and will observe how the character Pecola Breedlove fits into such spaces. Based on this premise, the analysis will include how the spaces are configured, whether the spaces foster affection or rejection, and, even more importantly, how the spaces contribute to the protagonist’s self-loathing process.

It is noteworthy that this text is a part of a broader research which is based on the studies of Bachelard (1964), Borges Filho (2020) and Xavier (2012), and referenced in the field of topoanalysis, which is the “systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives” (Bachelard, 1964, p. 8). According to Borges Filho (2020, p. 25-30), space, in the literary plot, has the following functions: 1) to distinguish the characters, placing them in the socioeconomic and psychological context in which they live; 2) to influence the characters and develop their actions; 3) to facilitate the action; 4) to situate the character geographically; 5) to represent the feelings experienced by the character; 6) to establish contrast with the characters; and 7) to anticipate the narrative.

The mapping of textual topography and the observation of parallels between micro and macro space—including scenery, nature, environment, and landscape—are important elements in this analysis. When investigating spatial coordinates, our viewpoint is oriented with elements derived from laterality (right-left), frontality (front-back), verticality (top-bottom), perspective (near-far), centrality (center-periphery), amplitude (vast-restricted) and interiority (interior-exterior) (Borges Filho, 2020, p. 48). The senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste) are also relevant to understanding the plot.

The range of elements to be considered when approaching the text expands, encompassing colors, shapes, music, voices, aromas, textures, and the most varied flavors. Notably, this specific way of perceiving the world is manifested in the plot. Thus, “through movement, contact and manipulation, the character apprehends the reality of objects and the structuring of space. [...] It is in this imbrication of character, action, and space that meanings are produced, and the topoanalyst must take this into account” (Borges Filho, 2020, p. 89).

Xavier (2012, p. 19), in the book *A casa na Fiction de autoria feminina*, presents the concepts of topophilia and topophobia, which can be understood, respectively, as synonyms for “happy space” and “place of fear and aversion.” For that author, the image of the house is “a valuable instrument for analyzing the human soul” without “neglecting the other elements of the textual fabric, as they interact with each other, especially in the case of the intersection character/space” (Xavier, 2012, p. 19-20). Therefore, there is a close relationship between the spaces occupied by the female characters of African descent in the novel *The Bluest Eye* and their psychological profiles. In our analysis this relationship reflects the intersectional conflicts of gender, race, and sexuality and is decisive for defining Pecola Breedlove’s personality.

## **2. The physical spaces in the novel *The Bluest Eye***

The Breedlove family lives on the ground floor of an “abandoned store on the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio” (Morrison, 1999, p. 31), an unimportant place, similar to a “box of peeling gray”, which did not harmonize with the whole of the street or the city and which, in remote times, had been inhabited by gypsies and used as a bakery, pizzeria and real-estate office. It was there that the Breedloves spent their days, “festering together in the debris of a realtor’s whim” (Morrison, 1999, p. 32).

The interior of the house was equally chaotic:

The large “store” area was partitioned into two rooms by beaverboard planks that did not reach to the ceiling. There was a living room, which the family called the front room, and the bedroom, where all the living was done. In the front room were two sofas, an upright piano, and a tiny artificial Christmas tree which had been there, decorated and dust-laden, for two years. The bedroom had three beds: a narrow iron bed for Sammy, fourteen years old, another for Pecola, eleven years old, and a double bed for Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove. In the center of the bedroom, for the even distribution of heat, stood a coal stove. Trunks, chairs, a small end table, and a cardboard “wardrobe” closet were placed around the walls. The kitchen was in the back of this apartment, a separate room. There were no bath facilities. Only a toilet bowl, inaccessible to the eye, if not the ear, of the tenants (Morrison, 1999, pp. 32-33).

The dilapidated physical space is also further illustrated through the abandoned furniture which “had aged without ever having become familiar”, because “there were no memories among those pieces. Certainly no memories to be cherished” (Morrison, 2003, pp. 33-34), since

The only living thing in the Breedloves' house was the coal stove, which lived independently of everything and everyone, its fire being "out," "banked," or "up" at its own discretion, in spite of the fact that the family fed it and knew all the details of its regimen: sprinkle, do not dump, not too much... The fire seemed to live, go down, or die according to its own schemata. In the morning, however, it always saw fit to die (Morrison, 1999, p. 35).

In general, the poor, marginalized and inhospitable environment reflects the self-image they have of themselves. They think they are ugly. In a certain way,

Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. [...] You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question (Morrison, 1999, pp. 36-37).

Their situation worsens when Cholly, drunk, sets fire to the place where they live. According to Claudia, the narrator:

Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail (Morrison, 1999, p. 16).

Because of the fire, the Breedlove family was put out of their home. Rather than being put "outdoors" each was sent to a different place. "Outdoors we knew, was the real terror of life", because "there is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final" (Morrison, 1999, p. 15). Pecola was received by the MacTeer family, who proudly lived in their own house. "Propertied black people spent all their energies, all their love, on their nests" (Morrison, 1999, p. 16). It was in this space Pecola met the sisters Claudia and Frieda and established a relationship of affection and friendship.

At school, Pecola was ignored and despised “by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk” (Morrison, 1999, p. 43). At Yacobowski’s Fresh Veg. Meat and Sundries Store, she was also rejected. When she tried to buy some candy from the owner—a merchant, white, immigrant, 52 years old, blue-eyed and Catholic—he followed her movements around the store. When she handed him the money for the candy, he was hostile toward her and the entire episode of buying the caramels was tense.

One day when Pecola and her friend, Claudia, met Pecola’s mother at the house where she worked, Pecola accidentally dropped a blueberry pie on the kitchen floor. Mrs. Breedlove became furious and attacked her daughter, throwing her out of the room. “Crazy fool... my floor, mess... look what you... work... get on out... now that... crazy... my floor, my floor... my floor.” As Claudia observes, “her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread” (Morrison, 1999, p. 107). In the context of this incident Pauline Breedlove was not Pecola’s mother, but Polly, the maid that took care of a little girl younger than Pecola, Claudia and Frieda. The little girl had blond hair, tied with a ribbon and who wore “a pink sunback dress and pink fluffy bedroom slippers with two bunny ears pointed up from the tips” (Morrison, 1999, p. 106). Because of her socioeconomic condition, Pauline Breedlove did not have the chance to be the mother of her own children, to be a woman, to be a property owner. She was the mother of her employer’s children. She lived in other people’s homes, serving them. It was a matter of survival as it continues to be for millions of black women around the world. After entering the job market, Pauline then began experiencing a situation common to women for a long time: the double shift. She was a cleaner outside and inside her own house. As Davis (1981) observes,’

Although housework as we know it today may eventually become a bygone relic of history, prevailing social attitudes continue to associate the eternal female condition with images of brooms and dustpans, mops and pails, aprons and stoves, pots and pans (Davis, 1981, p. 232).

The way the little white child treated Mrs. Breedlove, calling her Polly, and the way Pecola’s mother reacted to what happened, repeating the expression “my floor” four times, reveals, on some level, she believed she belonged to that household clan. That belief was false. She was only a black servant, and not a member of the family. In addition, the way Pecola was despised by the household confirms she was not welcome. Only her mother, Mrs. Breedlove was welcome in that household, and she was, in fact, almost a slave.

When we analyze these four spaces where Pecola Breedlove lived, namely her home, school, Mr. Yacobowski's store and the house where her mother worked, those spaces can be classified as topophobic. It is in those places, she is harassed, subordinated, and made invisible. Such rejection was justified because she was a poor, "ugly" girl of Afro-descendant. Her beauty profile did not fit the standards in North American society at that time.

### **3. INFLUENCE OF PHYSICAL SPACES ON PERCEPTION AND SENSES**

According to Bachelard (1964, p. 47), "a house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometric space." It is important to address a variety of elements in our study, including speech, touch and sight to understand how the senses influenced the protagonist. From an early age, Pecola absorbed, through the different senses, the values and heritage of the African American people. For example, at birth, as narrated by her own mother, Pecola already knew how to feed herself without anyone having taught her:

She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. [...] They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the hardest child to feed. But Pecola look like she knowed right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds (Morrison, 1999, pp. 123-124).

Mrs. Breedlove description goes beyond the denotative meaning. By saying that her newborn learned quickly and that, from the beginning, she already knew what she had to do, Pauline is, through her breast, passing on all her ancestry, as well as the *status quo* in which she was inserted. In other words, the breastfeeding gesture is a metaphor. In our perspective, Mrs. Breedlove was transmitting to her daughter everything she had already experienced: the explicit and implicit norms, the stereotypes, the rules regarding beauty standards, the role of black women in the labor market and Pecola's place in the context of segregation.

Although the mouth is used for oral expression, for Pecola it is just the channel through which she feeds. Pecola is a child of few words, almost mute and who has spoken since birth by mimicking sounds. Her silencing is illustrated several times during the narrative, as demonstrated in the quasi-dialogue she has with the grocer, Mr. Yacobowski:

She points her finger at the Mary Janes—a little black shaft of finger, its tip pressed on the display window. The quietly inoffensive assertion of a black child’s attempt to communicate with a white adult.

“Them.” The word is more sigh than sense.

“What? These? These?” Phlegm and impatience mingle in his voice.

She shakes her head, her fingertip fixed on the spot which, in her view, at any rate, identifies the Mary Janes. He cannot see her view—the angle of his vision, the slant of her finger, makes it incomprehensible to him. His lumpy red hand plops around in the glass casing like the agitated head of a chicken outraged by the loss of its body.

“Christ. Kantcha talk?”

His fingers brush the Mary Janes.

She nods.

“Well, why’nt you say so? One? How many?”

Pecola unfolds her fist, showing the three pennies. He scoots three Mary Janes toward her [...]. She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand. She does not know how to move the finger of her right hand from the display counter or how to get the coins out of her left hand (Morrison, 1999, p. 47).

Even though her silence is persistent, Pecola’s muteness reflects her shyness and introspection. However, that doesn’t mean she’s at peace. On the contrary, it becomes a major dilemma as she lives in constant conflict with her community, her family, and her identity. According to Gomes (1999, p. 8),

working between presence and absence, between the speech and the silence; groping along paths bordered by fissures and gaps—these are experiences that weave and intertwine in the threads of old and new stories, of ever-changing heritages, of crossing destinies and invaded, added, transformed legacies. All of this, the marginal discourse of Afro-American literature uses as sensitive material.

On the other hand, when Pecola felt welcome, she communicated without problems. In the small group—made up of China, Polaca and Miss Marie, women young and old, white, and black, pure and sinful—Pecola listened to stories and shared her doubts. All the women lived in the same “box of peeling gray”; the Breedlove family at the bottom and the prostitutes at the top. This aspect of verticality highlights the dichotomy of the upstairs and downstairs, the loft and the basement. As Bachelard (1964, p. 18-20) explains, “the dreamer constructs and reconstructs the upper stories and the attic until they are well constructed. [...] The cellar then becomes buried madness, walled-in tragedy.” Such a distinction reiterates our understanding that, by analogy, the ground floor, the basement, the place where the Breedlove family lived, was a topophobic space, while the upper floor, the attic, the room where China, Polaca and Miss Marie lived, was a topophilic environment, that is, welcoming and loving. In fact, those three ladies were



Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans. Amused by a long-ago time of ignorance. They did not belong to those generations of prostitutes created in novels, with great and generous hearts, dedicated, because of the horror of circumstance, to ameliorating the luckless, barren life of men, taking money incidentally and humbly for their “understanding.” Nor were they from that sensitive breed of young girl, gone wrong at the hands of fate, forced to cultivate an outward brittleness in order to protect her springtime from further shock, but knowing full well she was cut out for better things, and could make the right man happy. Neither were they sloppy, inadequate whores who, unable to make a living at it alone, turn to drug consumption and traffic or pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction, avoiding suicide only to punish the memory of some absent father or to sustain the misery of some silent mother (Morrison, 1999, pp. 53-54).

The three women upstairs were against “sugar-coated whores,” respected “good Christian colored women” and

Nor were they protective and solicitous of youthful innocence. They looked back on their own youth as a period of ignorance, and regretted that they had not made more of it. They were not young girls in whores’ clothing, or whores regretting their loss of innocence. They were whores in whores’ clothing, whores who had never been young and had no word for innocence. With Pecola they were as free as they were with each other (Morrison, 1999, pp. 54-55).

Paraphrasing Xavier (2012, p. 61-63)—who, in her study of the novel *A doce canção de Caetana* (1987), by Nélida Piñon, investigates the prostitutes at *Casa da Estação* (Sebastiana, Palmira and Diana)—we wonder if Polaca, China and Miss Marie could also be considered decadent representations of the Three Graces, the deities who live on Olympus and personify the ideals of feminine beauty.

The relationship between Pecola and the three prostitutes reinforced the ties of belonging, sisterhood and, most importantly, *dororidade*, a word that in Portuguese means the “pain caused in all Women by Patriarchalism.” *Dororidade* differs from sorority, which “does not seem to account for our blackness [...]. Pain can only be felt depending on the skin. The blacker, the more racism, the more pain” (Piedade, 2017, p. 21).

On the other hand, in the MacTeer family home, which was a topophilic place, Pecola often remained silent or refused to give her point of view when asked about a topic. Claudia narrates how the first meetings were, saying:

When we discovered that she clearly did not want to dominate us, we liked her. She laughed when I clowned for her, and smiled and accepted gracefully the food gifts my sister gave her.

“Would you like some graham crackers?”

“I don’t care.”

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face (Morrison, 1999, p. 17).

Her interest in food faded when she saw the young actress’ photo. The charm was immediate and overpowering. As observed by Borges Filho (2020, p. 57), “human beings relate to the surrounding space through their senses. Each of them establishes a relationship of distance/proximity with space.” When speaking of vision and taste, Borges Filho (2020, p. 59) says that the two senses “form the two poles of this relationship of distance and proximity. The first establishes a relationship of maximum distance between being and object/space; with the second, we have the shortest possible distance.” This overpowering association of the mouth with the eyes is highlighted when Mrs. MacTeer complains about milk consumption:

“Three quarts of milk. That’s what was in that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain’t none. Not a drop. I don’t mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?” (Morrison, 1999, p. 21).

The consumption of milk did not occur just because Pecola liked milk or because she was hungry, but because she used the cup stamped with the image of the white actress to sip it. In fact, the very act of picking up the cup and drinking through the mouth, satisfied a deep desire to be close to the idealized being, the actress Shirley Temple.

Another relevant fact in this passage is that Claudia’s mother, when asking her question, did not refer Pecola. Even knowing Pecola had drunk all three bottles of milk, Mrs. MacTeer ignores Pecola, commenting, with some incredulity and disdain, “What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?” Mrs. MacTeer’s recurring complaints give us a measure of the girl’s growing obsession with the blue-eyed actress.

This invisibility, as well as the mention of eye color, confirms the relevance of vision in the field of topoanalysis. As defined by Borges Filho (2020, p. 62), when analyzing a work, one must consider what are the visual stimuli that are in the context of the literary text, “starting with its visibility/invisibility character. [...] It is easy to deduce that a space that is not very accessible to the eye is a space that generally appears under the sign of fear, of distrust.”

In this novel, through eyesight, Pecola encounters on the street's dandelions, the cracks in the sidewalk and bumps in the pavement. Eyesight is used to characterize the dishonor she felt when walking through the streets, since, after leaving Mister Yacobowski's store, she "laps up the dredges of her shame" (Morrison, 1999, p. 48).

Even though she suffered falls, mistreatment, and rejection, it was on the street, in that non-place, she identified herself with the weeds, which were ugly and despicable. The streets, which at the same time represented belonging and rejection, visibility and invisibility, were the places she felt alive, the places she felt part of the world. There she saw and talked with inanimate things, which

she saw and experienced. They were real to her. She knew them. They were the codes and touchstones of the world, capable of translation and possession. She owned the crack that made her stumble; she owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her (Morrison, 1999, pp. 45-46).

Pecola was attentive to almost imperceptible details and had a connection with a mysterious and parallel world, which made her journey towards mental imbalance. For this reason, vision is fundamental for the unfolding of the narrative, since she initiates an incessant search for the bluest eyes, whether those of Shirley Temple or Mary Jane. When looking at such images, her happiness is complete, because the stamped face reflects a "smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort" (Morrison, 1999, p. 48).

The idealized image, both on the cup and on the candy packaging, transports Pecola to a fantastic world, because, through vision, she enters a reality that only exists in her imagination. And that illusion was real, palpable, and tasted by the mouth-eyes. Mary Jane's eyes are petulant and mischievous and "to Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison, 1999, p. 48).

In addition to vision, the senses of sound, color and smell are used to mark the passage of time and different emotional states. For each season, there is always a corresponding color. In Autumn, for example, there is a pastel tones. As Claudia describes,

It was a lonesome Saturday. The house smelled of Fels Naphtha and the sharp odor of mustard greens cooking. Saturdays were lonesome, fussy, soapy days. Second in misery only to those tight, starchy, cough-drop Sundays, so full of “don’ts” and “set’cha self downs.”

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn’t so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times. But her voice was so sweet and her singing-eyes so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without “a thin di-i-ime to my name.” I looked forward to the delicious time when “my man” would leave me, when I would “hate to see that evening sun go down...” ’cause then I would know “my man has left this town.” Misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother’s voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet (Morrison, 1999, pp. 23-24).

As we can see, the mother figure in general is a relevant character in the narrative, both from the point of view of the protagonist and the narrator. When analyzing the passage above, we observe the proximity-distance between both mother and daughter and how this relationship is revealed through the senses. Hearing, vision, and smell reinforce feelings of proximity and distance.

#### **4. PECOLA: SELF-LOATHING AND MADNESS**

Pecola was born and was rejected. Because of her color and hair, she was scorned by her mother, family, and neighbors. After entering school, this rejection was reinforced daily. She started to believe she was ugly. After all, her acceptable standard of beauty was that of the movie stars, stamped on a cup and printed in magazines and school textbooks. This is how, according to Gomes Jr. (2010, p. 173), a person gradually starts “to rebuild himself as a subject, based on the values of the Other”. She became stigmatized and an unsuspecting victim of the oppressor’s ideology, disregarding and emptying her identity, her own culture.

Trying to overcome being the ugly, clumsy, dull, and stupid girl who was not valued by anyone, including her parents, Pecola prayed every night, waiting for a transformation. She prayed she could be made like Shirley Temple, her ideal model of beauty. Her wish was to have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes. When Pecola, witnessed her parents’ constant fights and arguments, she shut her eyes; but her eyes never closed. She stopped feeling her body, hearing sounds, smelling, talking, but her eyes never stopped seeing. However, she began to doubt her own eyes, for

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes" (Morrison, 1999, p. 44).

In her mind, an image of beautiful eyes formed and, like a mantra, she silently recited:

Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes. Alice-and-Jerry-blue-storybook-eyes. (Morrison, 1999, p. 44).

Pecola gradually became more obstinate. In the school curriculum used to teach her how to read and write, much of the English language content was not in tune with her sociocultural reality. During class, the desire to have the bluest eyes, like those of the characters in the stories she heard at school, sprouted in her heart.

Everything Pecola experienced contributed to define her identity and, consequently, her mental health. She experienced painful situations that explained her insanity and behavioral disorders. Pecola was in a battle of survival with herself. Being a poor and black woman, in addition to physically presenting a standard of beauty different from that defined as acceptable and normal, triggered a series of events that, for her, only one person was to blame: herself. So, she concluded the simple fact of changing her eyes would make her happier, and equal to the other girls. Sadly, her conclusion worsened the situation. Pecola isolated herself and moved away from society, reality, and her own life, becoming mentally ill.

Madness, therefore, can come from a mixture of elements that combine economic, political, social, and cultural values. Those elements reinforce the stigmas associated with its ethnicity, gender, and class. For the racist, misogynistic, patriarchal, and post-slavery society of the time, treating African descents—above all, black women from this perspective—was pervasive and commonplace. However, for Pecola, these stigmas are the origins of her suffering and her identity crisis. Her delirium is a source of pleasure, an escape from reality; madness is her way of being in a meaningless world. From an intersectional perspective, it is essential to analyze

which structural conditions cross bodies, which positionalities reorient subjective meanings of these bodies, as they are experiences modeled by and during the interaction of structures, repeatedly colonialist, stabilized by the matrix of oppression, in the form of identity. In turn, identity cannot abstain from any of its markings, even if not all of them are contextually explicit (Akotirene, 2020, pp. 45-46).

The issue of identity is also discussed by Collins and Bilge (2016). For these authors, the vast body of studies within intersectionality, involving the theme of individual identities as intersectional and performative, changed the meaning of identity from something that “one has” to something that “one constructs”. Thus, they claim that

much intersectional scholarship supports this perspective on human subjectivity: individuals typically express varying combinations of their multiple identities of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and religion across different situations. Social context matters in how people use identity to create space for personal freedom (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p. 250).

Accordingly, the beauty standard imposed by hegemonic ideological groups was absorbed by Pecola, an easily manipulated prey, who, through attitudes and gestures, feeds on desires and anxieties that were strange to her. It is in this context the protagonist lives her increasing isolation. One of the elements that contributed to her own self rejection was the effect caused by the deconstruction of the African Americans identity in that period of US history. Martins (2007) uses the term assimilationist identities to describe the process that occurs when black people stop looking at themselves and their community and start valuing the cultures of the other communities. At that time, Anglo-Americans dictated the products that were seen in movies, fashion, and beauty. Those values were internalized and imitated.

In her *História Social da Beleza Negra*, Xavier (2021) discusses the power of the cosmetic industry in the United States at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century and how the market influenced the behavior of women, especially the African descent. The network of beauty products, including soaps, creams and solutions for skin whitening and hair straightening, gained publicity in the media, creating new hygiene habits, as well as establishing a black female beauty standard. Gomes (2020), in the book *Sem perder a raiz: corpo e cabelo como símbolos da identidade negra*, deals with this issue and says that

the blacker the skin color and the curlier the hair, the more people who have such characteristics are devalued and taught to devalue themselves, not only aesthetically, but also as human beings. Racism and whiteness, when operating together, throw poisonous darts at the construction of black identity and try to limit black individuals, especially children and women who, when looking in the mirror, see what it—racism—puts in front of them (Gomes, 2020, p. 19).

It is in this context Pecola develops a great fascination with animals, including a black cat, a perceptive, audacious, elegant, and fast-moving animal with blue eyes. She met the cat at the home of Louis Junior, a lonely and spoiled child, whose mother forced him to stay away from the black children in the neighborhood. She admired the feline, which had the sky-blue eyes, such as she wished to have:

He was black all over, deep silky black, and his eyes, pointing down toward his nose, were bluish green. The light made them shine like blue ice. Pecola rubbed the cat's head; he whined, his tongue flicking with pleasure. The blue eyes in the black face held her (Morrison, 1999, p. 88).

Even after she was attacked by the cat after Louis Junior threw it at her, Pecola's interaction with the cat was affectionate. The animal represented her own life: a black cat, just like her, scared, mistreated by a spoiled boy. The moment she touched him, he whimpered, and she realized they were a lot alike, black, scared, shy, whose blue eyes were "streaks of horror" (Morrison, 1999, p. 89). However, only the cat had blue eyes; she did not.

Naively, Pecola believed that the change in social class and her acceptance at school as a person depended exclusively on changing the color of her eyes. Blue eyes would be enough to change her status and she would be accepted by society, effortlessly, as were white people. Changing eye color is an impossible and insane act. Insanity is typical of schizophrenics. As Garcia-Camba (1991, p. 118) reports, citing studies by several researchers, one of the reasons for the development of schizophrenia is "the poor relationship between mother and child. The mother of the schizophrenic would have peculiar characteristics, uniting simultaneous tendencies of overprotection and rejection and hostility towards the child". The relationship between Pecola and her mother was conflicted since the time of conception. Pecola, in her most acute crisis, presented several symptoms of schizophrenia including hallucinations, changes in language, affectivity, motor movements, becoming lonely and unsociable, relating to objects to the detriment of people, immersing herself in her own unique world (Garcia-Camba, 1991, pp. 122-124). Roudinesco and Plon (1998, p. 190) add that

the primary causality of schizophrenia was the entry into an inauthentic life, leading to the loss of the self in existence, to a serious alteration of temporality and to autism, that is, a project of not being who one is.

Blue is the color of the sky, of immensity, of water. Blue is seen “almost always as transparent, pure, immaterial and cold; color of the divine, of truth and fidelity, with regard to truth and the compact celestial firmament. Color also of the unreal, of the fantastic” (Lexikon, 1990, p. 30). Pecola’s desire to have blue eyes is related to the beauty culture prevalent at that time and to the search for love, the divine, affection, attention, respect, and family balance. And not just any eye, it must be the bluest eye. The use of the superlative was an attempt to leave an inferior life.

Many social aspects contributed to Pecola’s ways of acting and living. However, the traumatic experience with her father was also a decisive factor in defining her personality. Cholly, taking advantage of the girl’s fragility, raped her in the kitchen, on a Saturday afternoon.

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love.

[...]

Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her (Morrison, 1999, p. 159-161).

After that tragic experience, Pecola was violently beaten by her mother, making the situation even worse. She got pregnant, but it didn’t last. Pecola’s mother remarked it would be the “ugliest thing walking. Can’t help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground” (Morrison, 1999, p. 187-188).

Dazed and obsessed with having blue eyes, Pecola sought out Soaphead Church, a pastor known for helping children. He, after hearing her request for blue eyes and realizing her naivety, said:

“We must make, ah, some offering, that is, some contact with nature. Perhaps some simple creature might be the vehicle through which He will speak. Let us see.”

[...]



“Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one” (Morrison, 1999, p. 173).

After feeding the animal and seeing its reaction, Pecola had no doubt that God had heard her request. She believed she had, in fact, gained the bluest eyes. Then, after the miracle, Soaphead Church, the minister, wrote in a letter to God:

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do. Now you are jealous. You are jealous of me. You see? I, too, have created. Not aboriginally, like you, but creation is a heady wine, more for the taster than the brewer (Morrison, 1999, p. 180).

The dialogues Pecola had with an imaginary creature at the end of the novel transformed her into a new person. From an ugly and shy girl, she became very expressive, commenting on her bluest eye, inquiring about its quality, concerned about what others think of her eye, what they think about her image. In a dialogue with her fictional friend, she asked

Suppose there are *two* people with bluer eyes?  
*So what? You asked for blue eyes. You got blue eyes.*  
He should have made them bluer.  
*Who?*  
Mr. Soaphead.  
*Did you say what color blue you wanted them?*  
No. I forgot.  
*Oh. Well* (Morrison, 1999, p. 201).

Pecola, who once only had Claudia and Frieda as friends, now has a new ally, who Pecola believes is jealous because of her eyes. Thus, Pecola dives into a world so deep that she can't see anyone except herself.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?  
*Blue enough for what?*  
Blue enough for . . . I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you!  
*I'm not going to play with you anymore.*  
Oh. Don't leave me.  
*Yes. I am.*  
Why? Are you mad at me?  
*Yes.*

Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes?

*No. Because you're acting silly.*

Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them?

*Get what?*

The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

*Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while.*

You promise?

*Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes.* (Morrison, 1999, p. 202)

Earlier, in her silence, Pecola talked to herself, now she talked to her imaginary companion. The theme is always the same: her success in acquiring the blue eye. Everyone could see Pecola was out of her mind:

The damage done was total. She spent 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, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind (Morrison, 1999, p. 202).

In the past, she had lived segregated in her own society. Now she is segregated from her conscience, from herself. She lives in a daydream, in a new world, moving out of the category of stigmatized blacks to the category of stigmatized crazy people.

In final analysis is the author's choice of Pecola's surname composed of the words *breed* and *love*. Love did not flourish in the poverty, segregation, and rejection that resided for so many years in the Breedlove household. For Pecola, her father was just Cholly, the representation of something unimportant, a drunk guy who annulled himself with the help of alcohol, and that raped and brutalized her. She wanted him to be just a normal dad. Her mother, who could have been more welcoming, compassionate, and loving, fled from reality, isolating herself in her bosses' house. Mrs. Breedlove rejected and often lashed out at her daughter, much like an executioner, changing from oppressed to oppressor. Through the characters and the name Breedlove, Toni Morrison reveals to us a family that never represented love.

## CONCLUSION

This study of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is part of broader research that is still under development. We analyzed the physical environments in the novel and observed how the character Pecola Breedlove acted within those spaces. We studied how those spaces caused affection or rejection and most importantly how they contributed to the protagonist's self-loathing.

To support our investigation, we started with an understanding of the textual topography and observed the parallels between micro and macro space, including scenery, nature, environment, and landscape. In addition, our viewpoint considered the spatial coordinates rising from the vertical, as well as considered the senses of vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste. When analyzing the work, we observed Pecola Breedlove's movement through different spaces, some of which were welcoming and affectionate and others hostile and topophobic.

Even though *The Bluest Eye* is set in the 1940s, Toni Morrison presents to the public what is still unspoken in schools, families, churches, and society in general in both the United States and in Brazil today. The analysis of the vulnerabilities of the character Pecola Breedlove and her process of psychological disintegration, after a major family trauma is a contemporary and thought-provoking theme. Our intersectional analysis shows that by combining economic, political, social, and cultural factors, we begin to understand how those factors change the emotional profile of Pecola Breedlove.

An emblematic work, the book is still banned from some schools to this very day in parts of the United States that did not include it on their lists of recommended books for high school students. *The Bluest Eye* is an invitation for the discussion of controversial themes such as discrimination, madness, and for reflection on issues of women in society at that time and in contemporary society. It is a timeless work, which is still alive and current. As the author says, in the afterword of the edition used in this study, "with very few exceptions, the initial publication of *The Bluest Eye* was like Pecola's life: dismissed, trivialized, misread. And it has taken twenty-five years to gain for her the respectful publication this edition is" (Morrison, 1999, p. 212).

Toni Morrison is a spokesperson for her people. Addressing themes such as racism and the female condition, the author reaches not only Afro descendants, but also a broader audience in the United States. Always a visionary, Toni Morrison seeks to preserve in her work the inheritance of the black people taken from Africa and enslaved in the

Americas. Historical facts, as well as the myths, songs, language, and stories told among families of past generations find shelter in the imagination of Toni Morrison. She shows her community that, despite all the difficulties faced by black people, the way to reverse existing inequalities is to know and reflect on the past, understand the present and aim for a future with respect for the recognition of ancestry.

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