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Critical Research Paper

Thank You Mom/Dad for Ruining My Childhood

An individual’s childhood is the most crucial part of their life. It’s where you start to develop both physically and mentally, what shapes you, who you are. It’s where you learn the rights from wrongs, where you learn how to act or react in different situations. This is why when a person faces a certain trauma or bad experiences in their childhood, it sticks with them for the rest of their life, they can never forget it. Whether it’s falling off your bike when you were eight and having a decent scar on your knee that reminds you of it every day or your first heartbreak at sixteen. However, some children have it harder. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is a novel in which child neglect is a central theme throughout the course of the text. Through the Freudian concepts of displacement, disassociation, and the psychosexual stages, Morrison illustrates the severity of the emotional (and sometimes physical) child abuse of the children Junior and Pecola in her novel, and how society handles this neglect and isolation, affecting their identification process.

To start off, Junior is Geraldine’s son. Geraldine is a middle-class colored woman; however, she considers herself high class and superior, and has no shame in showing her colorist side within her own African American race. Due to this, she doesn’t want herself or her son to associate themselves with those of darker colored skin tones. She prohibits Junior from playing with the other colored kids, which upset Junior. He wanted to, as any boy his age, play around with other kids his age, and have fun, get dirty, cuss. (Morrison 87) However, his mother stripped that away from him, and Junior became what we call today, a “loner”. This also caused Junior in a sense to question himself and who he was, because he looked like these other kids and lived in the same area as them but was not allowed to interact with them. Since Junior didn’t have any friends, even if he did, he wasn’t allowed to hang out with them, this led him to develop and build up feelings of anger and despair. Not only did his mom stop him from well, being a child, but she ignored him as well. Geraldine paid little to no attention to her son. “As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety...It was not long before the child discovered the difference in his mother’s behavior to himself and the cat.”(Morrison 86) Geraldine felt an odd deeper affection for the cat more than for her own son, and had no shame in showing it. In response to this lack of emotional affection from his mother, Junior displaces his feelings of neglect onto the cat itself. Sigmund Freud defines displacement as a defense mechanism in which an individual redirect their emotions from an original source, onto a different one. “…sending into consciousness a disguised and unrecognizable substitute” (Freud 2215) Junior felt as if his mother loved the cat more than she loved him, so he began to torture the cat, and later on started to direct that same humiliation onto other children as well, as a defense mechanism to project his negative feelings onto others and make them feel like he does.

It is known that a lack of love and abundance in pain, especially emotional, can either make or break a person. Research has been done in regard to how bad does child neglect and abuse affect a child, and in their developmental years. According to the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI), “Children who have experienced abuse and neglect are therefore at increased risk for a number of problematic developmental, health, and mental health outcomes… As adults, these children continue to show increased risk for psychiatric disorders, substance use, serious medical illnesses…” Although the children did not develop any medical illness and did not turn to substance use, the neglect the children endured in *The Bluest Eye* however, broke them, and affected their identification and personality development. According to Sigmund Freud, each child goes through a set of psychosexual stages in which the sexual and general personality of a child is developed. (Freud 2230) There are five stages in this concept, however the most accurate one present would be the Latent stage. In this stage, the child is beginning to form emotional relationships. This is where the Oedipal complex comes into play, in which the child begins to see their same-sex parent as a competition for their opposite-sex parent’s affection. This leads to feelings of jealousy and anger towards the same sex parent. In this context however, since Junior did not have an active or present father-figure in his life, he viewed the cat as the enemy, since it was what his mother was directing all her affection to. Sometimes when a fixation occurs or something goes wrong in these psychosexual stages, a perversion is discovered. Since Junior’s latent stage was affected by the cat, this may have caused him to develop a possible perversion in which he likes to inflict pain onto others. All the torture and torment he directed towards the cat and other children illustrates his love or the pleasure he finds in making others hurt and humiliate them. Junior becomes a child with a cruel and sadistic personality, illustrating an example of psychological impact child neglect/abuse has on the mental development of children.

Pecola is an eleven-year-old girl who has faced the most gruesome, unimaginable experiences. Taking into consideration her race, her gender, and social status, it can be concluded that she has faced a decent amount of discrimination. She was also targeted by Junior, when he began to act out due to the lack of affection. One of the most horrific experiences that she had encountered however, would be by/from her own father, Cholly Breedlove, who sexually abused her. (Morrison 162) Similar to Junior, this affected one of her psychosexual stages, as stated earlier. Pecola was still in the latent phase of her development, but after the incident she was forced to move into the genital stage, which is the last stage and in which you engage in sexual intercourse, willingly. Pecola did not have a say or choice in whether or not to have intercourse. Pecola responded to this incident through a concept called dissociation. Freud defines dissociation as the “splitting of the mind and the dissociation of the personality as the centre of our position.” (Freud 2220) Pecola begins to detach herself from her surroundings and begins to have conversations with herself. It is almost as if she created a world of herself to live in. She becomes mentally unstable, and her instability is shown when she talks to herself and says things like, "I know. He did a really good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off." (Morrison 195) Here Pecola is referring to her having blue eyes and claims that people look away from her and don't speak to her because they are "jealous" of her blue eyes, when in reality they all know what happened and are ashamed for her. Pecola is detaching, isolating herself from her surroundings and the people around her, simply because she believes they are jealous of her blue eyes. This conversation is an illustration of Pecola’s defense mechanism, dissociation.

What happened to Pecola did not just happen to her. It happened, happens to a lot of women, girls, especially like her. The time period in which *The Bluest* Eye was based on is a period in which racism and segregation was very much still happening. Women, especially if you were of African American race, were considered inferior. Every 9 minutes, a new sexual assault case is reported to Child Protective Services (CPS), and those are only the cases that have enough concrete evidence to report it as such. In 2016, 57,329 cases of child sexual abuse with under the age of 18 were active with concrete evidence. Out of all those cases, 82% were of females. And out of all, 59% were of people whom they were familiar with, 34% were family members, and 7% were strangers. This data was collected by the Rape, Abuse, Incest National Network (RAINN), an organization which a purpose to reach out and promote the severity of sexual abuse, especially those of which are claimed to be “unimportant”. These cases are just coming to light, however back then, situations like these were not talked about. Taking Pecola as a perfect example. When she was raped by her father, no one helped her. Everyone in town knew what happened, but somehow turned it against Pecola. They turned the other way when she was nearby, mumbled in between one another. Cholly was not put into jail or prison for what he did, he was not punished. Instead of getting Pecola the proper care and attention she needed, whether it be medical or psychological or emotional, the townspeople just made a joke out of it and used it sort of as a means of entertainment. It can be implied that Morrison included this horrific and disturbing incident to emphasize the severity and importance of situations like these, especially in young, defenseless girls.

The severity and great impact child neglect and abuse has on an individual’s overall development is in fact crucial. Using Sigmund Freud’s concepts discussed in his lectures help to better understand the development of personality, and different ways as humans, we cope with situations. Toni Morrison is critiquing society for how the adults handle situations like these; they do not. They don’t do anything about it, which relates to today in which children & teenagers have little to no say in anything. Junior and Pecola have both had a rough childhood, with traumatic experiences that will have a permanent impact on the rest of their lives as they mature into adulthood. Morrison placed emphasis on the greater things; just because children are young does not mean that they can’t suffer, nor that they can’t feel pain.

Works Cited

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