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Shades of Racial Discrimination

Influential writer Toni Morrison, stated in her powerful book *Beloved*, that “Definitions belong to the definers, not the defined” (GoodReads). Morrison touches upon the troubles of these “definitions”, or racial discriminations, in her very first book *The Bluest Eye*. She gives readers a close look at the lives of the “defined”, showing how the “definers” have beaten them down. Taking place during the 1940’s in Lorain, Ohio, multiple characters, in particular a little girl named Pecola, struggle with living a life full of ridicule. While the racism of the midwest is less blatant than the racism of the Jim Crow south, Morrison conveys that the effects are just as damaging. Through characters in the *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows the outcomes of discriminatory actions, such as poor housing, fewer jobs, bullying in schools, and lack of police authority, addressing prominent issues in our current society.

Having somewhere to live with a roof over your head is a constant struggle, specifically for minorities due to discrimination. In *The Bluest Eye*, a little girl named Claudia brings up the awful reality that because she is poor the “Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days” (Morrison 17). As Claudia is only nine at the time, she does not realize that the true reason for this “terror” is because the majority of the world is against her; more specifically the color of her skin. In a report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), they found that in cases of buying

homes, black people were shown and told about 17 percent less properties than white people (CBS). HUD also discovered that “Asians were told about 15.5 percent fewer homes and shown nearly 19 percent fewer properties” than white people (CBS). In cases of renting, many minorities, such as blacks, Asians, and Latinos were consistently denied of getting fair housing (CBS).

Minorities are not only denied of better housing opportunities, but also available jobs. According to the U.S Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, “the law forbids discrimination when it comes to any aspect of employment, including hiring, firing, pay, job assignments, promotions, layoff, training, fringe benefits, and any other term or condition of employment”. Yet currently, and in *The Bluest Eye*, this seems to not be the case. In a particular passage in *The Bluest Eye*, Mrs. Breedlove mentions her white employer “didn’t never give me the eleven dollars she owed me, neither. That hurt bad... Kept on telling me I owed her for uniforms and some old broken-down bed she give me” (Morrison 121). Unfortunately, due to Mrs. Breedlove’s ethnicity her employer will not pay her because she knows she can get away with this action. She continuously blames Mrs. Breedlove for not being able to pay her, and results to verbally abusive behavior. Apparently, abuse has not disappeared in the workplace, as a study done by Michigan State University shows “racial discrimination and harassment remain pervasive throughout the workplace, with 40% to 76% of ethnic minority employees experiencing at least one unwanted race-based behavior within a 12- to 24-month period” (7 Racial).

Inconceivably, racial discrimination has begun to become a problem in schools as early as preschool. Morrison briefly mentions teachers preferring students with lighter skin tones, as

Claudia, an African American girl says about a light skinned black girl; "When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly" (Morrison 62). Here, the connotation implies that for Claudia, getting smiled at by teachers is a rare occurrence, one that she has never been privileged to experience. Claudia's observation that white or light skinned black people get preferred treatment from teachers is unfortunately true. In an article by the Editorial Board of *The New York Times*, they cited a study done by Yale University's Child Study Center. In this study, the research found that preschool teachers tended to watch the black boys the longest. When specifically asked by researchers who demanded the most attention, 42 percent of the teachers chose the black boy and 34 percent chose the white boy. Oddly enough, in the case of girls, 13 percent chose the white girl and 10 percent the black girl. However, according to the U.S. Education Department's 2011-2012 Civil Right's Data Collection, "Black students are suspended or expelled at triple the rate of their white peers", and black girls were suspended at a far greater rate than any other girls of other ethnicities at a rate of 12 percent.

Unfortunately, school based racial discrimination does not just exist in unfair disciplinary actions from teachers, but also in bullying from their fellow peers. At one point in *The Bluest Eye*, a dark skinned black girl named Pecola is taunted by her peers due to her skin tone. "They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin... Pecola edged around the circle crying. She had dropped her notebook, and covered her eyes with her hands" (65-6). Bullying does not just have a physical affect on the person, but a mental effect as well. According to Matt Dickinson, "Charity Beatbullying said of 59 cases of child suicide reported in the national media between 2000 and

2008, 26 were definitely connected to bullying.” The bullying of students due to possessing a skin color other than white is completely intolerable as it can lead to devastating actions.

Astonishingly, Morrison does not directly mention one of the most prominent issues currently occurring in our society; racial profiling among police authorities. In San Francisco, a report by Blue Ribbon Panel on Transparency, Accountability and Fairness in Law Enforcement, discovered that while African Americans only make up 5.8 percent of city residents, forty percent of officer-involved shooting victims were African Americans from 2010-2015 (Williams). In cases of police stops and searches, the report found that during the month of February 2016, African Americans accounted for 15 percent of all traffic stops, and 42 percent of non consensual searches, despite many not having anything illegal in their possession (Williams). In addition, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health along with Bureau of Justice Statistics found that “White Americans use drugs more than black Americans, but black people are arrested for drug possession more than three times as often as whites” (Goyette, Scheller).

Although Morrison does not mention racial profiling among police authorities, she discretely shows the *lack* of police authority in the black community. On more than one occasion, several actions convey the sense of distrust black people endure each day. One of these incidents occurs when Frieda is inappropriately touched by their boarder, Mr. Henry. Instead of going to the police with an accusation of Mr. Henry being a child molestar, her father takes matters, and a gun, into his own hands and “shot at him” (Morrison 100). When another tragic event occurs, the police are once again not contacted. Young Pecola Breedlove is raped by her own father and yet he manages to get away as the police are not even called into action. This

sense of distrust, or feeling that the police can not and will not defend the black community is quite common amongst the current black society. In the report by Blue Ribbon Panel on Transparency, Accountability and Fairness in Law Enforcement in San Francisco, they “concluded that residents in minority neighborhoods had lost significant trust in the police, citing undercover officers jumping out of cars and frisking young men without their consent as an example” (Williams).

Morrison incorporates many real world issues into *The Bluest Eye*, deftly touching upon the troubles of racial discrimination in our society. She shows the devastating results of discrimination in the black community, such as poor housing, fewer jobs, bullying in schools, and lack of police authority. Through the use of many different scenarios and actions taken against those with dark skin, Morrison sheds light on how difficult the lives of minorities can be due to racial biases.

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