

# The Dreams of Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright

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## Abstract

*The paper introduces two child protagonists, Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright, and analyzes and compares their difficult childhoods, influenced by the tragic impact of racisms and long-time effects of slavery.*

The rapidly developing field of childhood studies focuses, among other things, on how the experience of childhood is modified by a given cultural and historical context, because while “childhood as a phase in the biological development of human beings has always existed, to a surprising degree the perceptions, experiences, and understandings of childhood have historically been subject to many, and quite dramatic, changes” (Bubíková, 11). This paper analyzes the unfortunate and tragic impact of racism on the childhood of two black characters - Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright, the protagonists of the novels *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright respectively.

The setting of both novels is the South of the USA at the beginning of the 20th century. Both novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Black Boy* are regarded as “Bildung” or “initiation stories” as they depict the development of a child, the loss of childhood innocence and its causes. Pecola and Richard are of the same ethnic group, social strata and their stories are as precious as gems because they uncover the nature and depth of emotions that people felt in the situations of social degradation, i.e. in the times Jim Crow legislation. Pecola and Richard frequently experienced a lot of tragedies and disappointments because nobody protected them from the nasty world outside, from abuse, hard work, crime and sexuality – and this all happened to them for one reason – for their race.

Their parents - instead of mediating the Jim Crow world to them gently - perpetrated the violence and injustice on their children themselves, applying the harsh rules of the street at home. Therefore, Pecola’s and Richard’s initiation process was quicker and their characters were shaped by a constant threat. Their parents fulfilled none of their parental duties and therefore failed in their parental roles. While they were still dependent and vulnerable, Richard and Pecola experienced neglect, Pecola even abuse, both physical and psychological.

It is evident that it was not the race but the society's perception of the race and the society's action that built constrains and limited Richard and Pecola's freedom. Racism, a prejudice towards people of different color, was applied from the position of power and the American society was its advocate. The impact of racism on black Americans as individuals was observable because it brought about split identities, one true and one imposed. They had to adjust their behavior to the situation, suppress their true inner self for the sake of their safety.

The impact of racism on black Americans as individuals was observable because it brought about split identities, one true and one imposed. Not only were they conscious of who they were, but also of who they were in the eyes of white people. In accordance with the situation, they had to adjust their behaviour, denying their true inner self for the sake of their safety. In the same sense, Du Bois proclaimed:

The nature of American society allowed African Americans to see themselves only "through the revelation of the other world. it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.

(as quoted in Ritterhouse, 114-115)

This was the reason why the lives of individual black Americans were not lived fully, why their children were not allowed to be spontaneous and happy, why the pressures of the society were so devastating. Not only the bodies but also the souls of black people remained bound and enslaved long after the abolition of slavery.

The freedom of a black individual was limited, their feelings defined, their acts were above all to serve the whites. The attitudes, opinions, intelligence and personality of a black individual made little or no difference unless they offended a white individual. Still, black individuals living in the Jim Crow South longed to maintain their attitudes and opinions, to develop their intelligence and personality. Thus, being forced to live in the system they did not approve of, every black individual adopted his/her own strategy of coping with the stress that stemmed from the asymmetry of the social role and innermost thoughts, feelings, desires. And how does this apply to Richard and Pecola?

Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright represent two antonyms in their reactions to racial oppression, to the society where one race was superior to the other. While Richard never approved of the white

supremacy, did not respect and follow its overt or implied rules, Pecola absorbed the white culture and identified herself with it fully. In the words of a critic: "Pecola Breedlove fails to discover a true self precisely because she allows her values to be dictated by the white mythology" (Powell, 752).

While Richard was angry because he felt that he was not treated rightly, that according to his own standards he deserved to be treated with respect, Pecola reconciled herself with her fate, and with the exception of pleading God for blue eyes she did nothing, in everyday encounters, to protect herself against mockery, beatings or rape. However, her passivity must not be confused with indifference, apathy or insensitivity. The reverse is the case – she was always paralyzed with horror and at the same time too weak to counteract. Geta LeSeur similarly explains Pecola's character:

Pecola is universally considered ugly, despised, and ignored. She rarely smiles; she looks "whipped" and her eyes are haunted. Any act of violence, such as a dog's death or her parents' quarrels, makes her ill. She is keenly aware of the world around her; her sensitivity and feelings are very near the surface. (125)

It was this vulnerability that made it so easy for her to escape into madness, into the world where her dream of being a beautiful girl with blue eyes became reality. Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright were prisoners, their freedom was limited and the primary cause was their race.

Richard Wright depicted one vital moment when he for the first time realised there were racial differences. He travelled with his mother from Mississippi to Arkansas:

At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a 'white' line and a 'black' line. During my visit at Granny's a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died.

(Wright, 44)

From this moment on, he kept asking his mother: "Then what am I?" (Wright, 47) and the knowledge of two different races – one privileged, one disadvantaged – was since then an ever-present fellow that accompanied Richard wherever he went, although he could truly realize its full significance in the years to come.

As Richard grew up, so grew his awareness of limitations that his skin color brought about. He realized that as a black man he could never earn enough to travel north and therefore he was bound to one place. Furthermore, the fact that he was forced to hide his true emotions was for him of the same importance. Richard, similarly to other young blacks in the South, wanted to hope for better future. In his heart he was secretly hoping that morality existed – somewhere else, in the distant North, in distant future. The following dialogue of Richard and his friends illustrates such hope:

“A colored man’s all right up north.” Justifying flight.  
“They say a white man hit a colored man up north and that nobody did a damn thing!” Urgent wish to believe in flight.  
“Man for man up there.” Begging to believe in justice.  
(Wright, 78)

For Pecola, the feeling of humiliation was more intense than for Richard because she identified with the image that the others had about her. White people affected her life decidedly through her parents. Her mother, Pauline, idealized the white society, while her own family reminded her of the sad reality that she herself would never be rich, blond, and admired. The sharp contrast between the idealized life and her own, ruined one gradually changed Pauline’s character. Finally, long before Pecola was born, Pauline’s struggle resulted in the feeling of hatred of whatever reminded her of her own blackness. Pecola’s father, Cholly, was an amoral character whose life was full of constant pain from feeling impotent and weak, and who thus felt irresistible compulsion to prove the opposite by the means of violence. In another words, making a connection with “Dick-and-Jane” idealized white world where people live in “green-and-white” houses, Phyllis Klotman claimed:

The Breedloves’ lives, however, are like the third—the distorted run-on—version of “Dick and Jane,” and their child Pecola lives in a misshapen world which finally destroys her. (123)

Pauline, Cholly and their experience with white people were the causes of Pecola’s devastated fate. From the time of her infancy, Pauline despised her daughter, considered her poor, ugly and worthless. Interestingly, Pauline did not lack maternal feelings, she just directed them towards the white children of her masters rather than towards her own ones. The more she

admired, cared for and loved the “white angels”, the more spiteful she was to her own blood, as can be seen in the following extract:

Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. [...]

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.”

(Morrison, 85)

As if she was not tortured enough by the violence of her parents, Pecola suffered more due to her unquestioned acceptance of the imposed values. By contrasting herself with Shirley Temple, she found herself the most insignificant. She mistook the white, blond, singing film star for the only beauty code that existed, making her own “black, black, black” existence unacceptable and intolerable. Every single hair curl on Shirley Temple’s head made the contrast between her and Pecola more striking, and Pecola concluded that she had no right to be happy as her beauty did not compare with Shirley’s and in result she attributed all her tragedies to her appearance. However mistaken Pecola might have been, her conclusion to a great extent reflected the biased world around her. Clearly, being under the constant scrutiny, being beaten and abused was agonizing enough, but Pecola brought her suffering to extreme by sacrificing herself willingly, by admitting she was worthless, hoping in the unachievable.

Were Richard and Pecola compared from the point of view of their dignity, they would be identified as absolute opposites. While Richard had to be cautious as his contempt for whites and their behaviour was frequently accompanied by a corresponding expression in his face, Pecola’s feeling of inferiority could not be more deep and complex, shining through her every gesture. As he was growing up, Richard had to learn how to control his expression gradually, painfully, learning new facts during his numerous encounters with whites. Pecola was bearing the pain inside her all the time, her feeling of unworthiness became part of herself and for that reason she could not keep her head up. In the words of Pin-chia Feng, an

expert, "Pecola's 'growing down' fleshes out the work of imposed oppression and racial neurosis." (40)

Richard provoked white people to violent attacks because he did not keep his eyes down, Pecola provoked everyone because she did. The reason in both cases, however, was the same – they were both black. Their different attitudes can be explained by different aims they wanted to achieve in order to be free people. In a sharp contrast with Pecola, Richard's definition of the "I" was independent on the reflection of this "I" in the eyes of others. His will was strong enough to oppose, deny, and redefine their wrong presumption. While Pecola built her secret inner world as a safe place where she could dwell without feeling shame and constant pain, Richard's inner world served him as a source of power that nobody could violate.

Richard longed for going north in order to escape while Pecola dreamt about blue eyes that would bring her "Dick-and-Jane" happiness. Both of them found such ways of escape that were accessible to them – Richard escaped literally from the South to the North, Pecola escaped on a more abstract level, from the unbearable reality to her dream world.

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