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THE IMPACT OF DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES ON THE PROTAGONISTS' CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN THE BLUEST EYE AND ABSALOM, ABSALOM

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Abstract

Taken as a common matter in the two novels *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Absalom, Absalom* by William Faulkner, dysfunctional families, effect the development of the characters strongly. Both Morrison and Faulkner indicate with their effective ways how hard it is to exist and survive in a destructive society including the family which the characters in the book were born into. The protagonists Pecola Breedlove and Henry Sutpen were both raised in dysfunctional families, in terms of unity, physical and psychological well-being. The reader may find the stories and characters demanding their empathy as the stories are close, if not directly taken from, the real life itself. In this context, this paper aims to examine the effects of destructive experiences the protagonists of these two novels face in hostile environments as they grow up and get ready for adulthood by means of studying the similarities and differences of the outcomes in the development of their personalities.

Keywords: Dysfunctional families, Absalom absalom, The bluest eye, William faulkner, Toni morrison.



1. INTRODUCTION

It is important to understand the true meaning of dysfunction and its effects on humanity before examining the effects of the dysfunctionality of Sutpen and Breedlove families. In the general sense, dysfunction is the abnormal or unhealthy behaviour of people within a group. Moving from this point of view, a family is dysfunctional when there's constant and everlasting conflict, neglect and misbehaviour in the domestic environment. There's an enormous amount of psychological and emotional conflict within the family members, and sometimes it becomes coupled with neglect and abuse. Children from dysfunctional families assume that this is normal and most of the time this results in self-incrimination. Even though the term dysfunctional family is used deliberately in the popular culture, we must recognize that every argument doesn't qualify as dysfunction. In fact, it may only become evident when unpleasant behaviours complicate the individual family members' attempts to function, thrive and grow as healthy human beings. In order to have a healthy and happy adult, you need to plant the seeds of understanding and appreciation into your children, strengthen their roots with care and varnish their branches with compassion. Oppositely, growing up in a toxic environment can have a lasting impact on children transitioning into adulthood. The parents from dysfunctional families possess characteristics such as abusiveness, negligence, substance addiction and highly controlling behaviour which permanently scar children as they grow into adulthood and leave them at a risk of developing depression, low self-esteem, anxiety and other mental illnesses. That is why, when we look at Pecola Breedlove and Henry Sutpen, we see what man has cruelly made of man. They're the embodiment of the wrong doings, abuse, conflict and neglect of the parental figures they had while growing up.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison challenges the readers to participate in the tragic abuse of Pecola, whose father has wronged her terribly, to witness what history does to people when it goes unnoticed and when people are silenced against injustice. "Quiet as it's kept", Pecola's father Cholly Breedlove raped her, impregnated her and left her. Her mother witnessed the rape, stayed silent, and the society failed to recognize the damage and therefore disregarded Pecola (Frantz 2). It's not only the father's mistreatment of a little girl, but also the negligence and apathy of the family and the society against the pitiful. The lack of compassion draws Pecola to self-hatred, which results in blaming herself which is a complete misjudgement of her parents' and the community's inability to show love and care. Unable to recognize the corruption in the people and biased by the popular media's idea of beauty, Pecola thinks that her parents and the society don't love her because she's ugly. Her blackness is a burden on her shoulders that she thinks will be vanished if she acquires the blue eyes which is a symbol of beauty, along with blonde curls and white skin; the perfect example of the effects of white supremacy on the black community (Sofiani et al. 262). Therefore, her blackness -her ugliness, according to Pecola, is the reason why the people cannot bring themselves to love her. This is the internalization of every mean comment she heard from the society, every harassment she had from the kids at school and every prying eye that's scorned her. Pecola's self-hatred is the product of the awareness of her "invisibility" in the society (Ramirez 81). The community either denies her existence or they tyrannize her for her appearance. However, the community she lives in is the bigger picture, but when we look in detail, Pecola's trauma begins even before the rape: with her mother's lack of self-love. To be able to show love and nurture a child into a healthy person can't be expected from a mother who cannot find it in herself to show love firstly to herself, because she's in a battle with everything and everyone surrounding her. Just like Pecola, she grew up in an unhealthy environment, believing she's ugly and not worthy of good in a society in which being white is the medium of being beautiful and accepted by the environment. She internalized the ugliness and invisibility the mainstream society implicitly forced on her and she ended up despising everything the white supremacy imposed on the black community. In contrast to her mother's hatred towards everything white and as a result of her dysfunctional parenting skills, Pecola's internalization of ugliness and invisibility turns into a yearning for whiteness in order to be beautiful, accepted and visible to the society. "She would see what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (Morrison 47). She sees herself as the rest of the community sees her, which leads her to hide under a quilt, so that her ugliness is invisible to those around her, especially herself. The name of the family even suggests that they would breed love. However, the head figure of the family is a man who can't nurture love in his household (Andrews 142). The infliction of her mother's lack of compassion and the society's way of denying Pecola becomes even more fatal when it's doubled with her father's rape resulting in impregnation and losing the child at a very young age. As well as Pauline, Pecola's mother, Cholly also grew up in a destructive domestic household, without love, care and compassion which led him to grow up into a man who's not capable of love. However, it wasn't only his household that led him into the path of abusiveness, it was also his first sexual experience which was interrupted by two white men with guns. The



armed men first interrupted their intercourse with flashlights and then they forced him to continue having sex with Darlene, an action which neither Darlene nor Cholly had consented for anymore. "Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters" (Morrison 150). The fact that two armed white men brutally destroyed his first sexual encounter with a girl, led him to direct his hatred towards the girl rather than the men because they were white and he was black. His internalization of the white supremacy made him hate his roots, his girlfriend, and thus, erased the last bit of hope that he could nourish love in his heart. It was easier for Cholly to hate the one he couldn't protect rather than hating himself or the actual criminals since they were superior and stronger, which brings us to think that Darlene's only fault, as Morrison writes, was to be the "witness to his failure, his impotence" (151). Cholly was too embarrassed to tell anyone about the incident and even if he told someone, he didn't have anyone to get a stable advice from, which also caused his humanistic feelings and behaviours to perish deep in the darkness of his soul. He became a husband and a father somehow, since history repeats itself, Cholly became a failure at both. He was a drunken and abusive husband, and he didn't know how to behave as a parent, thus ending up as an abusive father who impregnated his own daughter. He loved Pecola, as Claudia puts it, "He, at any rate, was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (Morrison 206). Perhaps Cholly thought that the only way to show love to this invisible little girl was to make her feel visible, and she was visible to her father, but that was not the visibility she dreamed of. A product of dysfunctional family and society, Cholly Breedlove, petrified the goodness in his own daughter, by means of raping her twice and impregnating her. A father's fatal misinterpretation of love towards his daughter led Pecola to schizophrenia.

Pecola met abuse, discrimination, death, helplessness and hopelessness, feelings many others don't even experience in a lifetime, all at once at a really young age. She was wronged by her mother, her father, her friends and even the priest, the representative of the divine power in the society. Since she was too young and insecure to blame anyone else, she chose self-hatred, the only form of expression she saw from her superiors. All the oppression found an escape when her imaginary friend -her inner voice came to life. She had a friend, finally, and she hated that friend. She hated that voice that was able to express Cholly's abuse towards her and still, it was the only voice telling her to go out, to live her life. Even in mental illness, Pecola was searching for a way out of everything she went through, she found herself in a make-believe world where she had the bluest eyes. "Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them" (Morrison 195). Pecola talks about the people's ignorance of her blue eyes but there's more to her words. It's the first time she actually recognizes that people denying her is wrong, unbelievable and even unacceptable. It's also the first time that she values herself and questions the rest of the community's discrimination of her. But most importantly, it's her cry for help and her disappointment of the silence she heard so loudly from everyone about her abuse. The trauma of this story is taken closely from the society we live in; the dysfunctionality of her family and her society failed Pecola and left her soul severely injured and stole a possible healthy mind and future from her.

In his book *Absalom, Absalom!* William Faulkner portrays Henry Sutpen as another victim of a dysfunctional family and his personality is a product of Thomas Sutpen whose success not only costed him his life but also cost Henry his own life as well. The design which requires a plantation, slaves, a wife and children, was the most important thing for Thomas Sutpen, in a sense that it wasn't him that fathered his sons but it was his design. "I had a design. To accomplish it I should require money, a house, a plantation, slaves, a family - incidentally of course, a wife" (Faulkner 263). Sutpen was driven by his ambition to be rich and a respected person in the society. Social status was everything to Sutpen that he abandoned his first child and wife when he found out about her being an octoroon: a miscegenous marriage was never acceptable. Blinded by his ambitions, Sutpen rejects his first-born son and the mother of his last child. He even uses Henry in doing so, and what's more, he destroys him. The absence of a normal father-son relationship, furthermore the lack of a human relationship between him and his sons, eventually destroyed all of Sutpen's hundred (Marshall 20, 21). The female descendants are of no value for Sutpen because it's the male heir who can continue a father's dynasty. So he pays no attention to his daughters Judith and Clytie. His women are only good to serve his sexual needs, give him children and provide him with social status (Siddik 2). It's not only the women who aren't worthy of Sutpen's recognition, instead he can victimize anyone in the way of his design.

Both Charles and Henry fell victim to Sutpen's tyranny. Especially Henry struggled to exist in Sutpen's hundred while yearning to get away from it. He couldn't leave until he went to the university and he didn't know any other life than the Sutpen's plantation. He always felt the burden of his father's values. The



first appearance of Henry was when he was being forced to watch a brutal fight between the slaves that didn't stop until one of the men were unable to stand at all, complete state of violence to which he reacted with constant "screaming and vomiting" (Faulkner 29). This bloody scene was too scary for a child to endure, but Thomas forced his son to watch this horrible act without considering the impacts it would leave on a child. Perhaps, it was because of the authoritarian characteristic of Thomas Sutpen that caused Henry to be less individualistic. He didn't leave Sutpen's hundred until university, which means that he lived under the rules of Sutpen and he obeyed all the decisions that were already made for him before he even could think for himself. Once he saw the outside world and met Bon, he was mesmerized by his elegance and everything Bon did seemed perfect to him, thus Henry named him his best friend. Sutpen's lack of compassion was the reason for Henry to fall for the slightest bit of kindness and affection by Bon. He never questioned Bon's reasons to be friends with him, since it was the first time he actually had a friend and brought him home for Christmas, unaware of everything that would destroy him. This was the beginning of the father-son quarrel about Charles Bon. Judith, Henry's sister, fell in love with Charles and they decided to get married, which became the first milestone in Henry's downfall. Thomas Sutpen didn't give his consent and in order to preserve Bon's companionship, Henry quarrelled with his father and "abjured his father and renounced his birthright and the roof under which he had been born" (Faulkner 79). Although the tyrannical father raised him, Henry isn't what Thomas expects him to be and breaks the inherited mould of violence and carelessness specific to the name of Sutpen.

However, going away wasn't his escape from the crushing authority of Thomas Sutpen. When they met again during the Civil War, Sutpen told Henry that Charles Bon was a quadroon -that he was of 1/16 black blood. Henry Sutpen, who didn't care for the incestuous relationship between Charles and Judith, couldn't remain indifferent to the miscegenation. His priorities are the products of the society and the way he observed Sutpen while growing up. "But kings have done it. Even dukes! There was that Lorraine duke named John something that married his sister. The pope excommunicated him but it didn't hurt! It didn't hurt! They were still husband and wife" (Faulkner 342). Somehow, he brought himself to accept the incestuous relationship, by reasoning it with kings' and dukes' relationships. Henry was in a situation where he questioned his own beliefs, thoughts and actions. He could accept that Bon was their brother, but he couldn't accept him being part black. This man who had different priorities than Sutpen, like human values, pride and goodness, brought Charles to Sutpen's hundred where he shot him at the gates. The kid who screamed and vomited when he saw men fighting, ended up killing his half-brother. It was his reckless ways and his father's influence on him that made him a murderer. Henry Sutpen, after everything he experienced, conflicted mostly with himself; he loved sister and fought for her happiness, it was also himself who deprived her from the happiness she yearned for. He was enamoured with Bon so much and trusted him with his life, but it was him that took Bon's life. He couldn't bare the miscegenation, but not the incest. It was Henry's indecisiveness to pursue his truths which facilitated Thomas Sutpen's manipulations of Henry to do whatever he needs to do in order to discard Charles from his life for good, so he's no longer a threat to his dynasty. He exterminated Bon with Henry's hand, but it was his desire to acquire sons that led him to his own downfall (Shuang 99). When he found out that Milly bore a baby girl, he abused her and that caused Wash Jones to kill him with a rusted scythe.

It seems like Thomas Sutpen reaped what he sowed but it didn't end with Sutpen's death, because Henry still kept paying for his father's sins. A dysfunctional father Thomas Sutpen, caused his only surviving son Henry to struggle in order to flee the guilt of murdering his brother and made him a prisoner secluded in one of the buildings on Sutpen's hundred where he came "to die" (Faulkner 373). The cursed plantation, Sutpen's hundred, became a graveyard for everyone who set foot on it, especially if they were a threat to Sutpen's dynasty. His fatal ambitions, his lack of compassion for his children, his inability to treat people as anything other than instruments and his violent ways of handling his problems failed Henry as a son, leaving him miserable, sinful, belittled, unhappy and deserted. Henry lived the last few years of his life isolated from everyone on Sutpen's hundred, not only because he was a murderer who ran away from the police without a place to go but also because he was punishing himself for everything his father did and made him do; until his half-sister Clytie burned the house down in order to protect Henry from the law (Easterbrook 78, 79). The dysfunctionality of Sutpen as a father made a murderer out of a possibly intelligent and kind man who would be a good role model and respectable person in the society, as well as destroying the lives of everyone around him.

As we have seen the examples of the protagonists from *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Bluest Eye*, the dysfunctionality of a family effects the individuals' lives permanently and shapes their personality as they grow into adulthood and try to exist in the society. They are not aware of their actions, if they're good or bad, they think it's normal behaviour of their personal development; mainly because they follow the example that they



were given at home, whether consciously or subconsciously. All these conflicts that exist in the dysfunctional families remain unsolved in themselves that their members usually end up feeling unhappy, alienated and excluded for the rest of their lives which cause them to develop mental or personality disorders and sometimes, exist in the society without being recognised (Gomez 128). Morrison and Faulkner successfully portrayed two different types of characters who grew up with destructive familial ties, had experiences with abusive parents and helplessly shaped their characters on the roots of the dysfunctionality and the failure of their families.

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