Creation of self and personalism in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye and Beloved

Virginia Costello

The University of Montana
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check “Yes” or “No” and provide signature**

Yes, I grant permission  
No, I do not grant permission

Author’s Signature  Virginia M. Costello

Date: July 31, 1993

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author’s explicit consent.
The Creation of Self and Personalism

in

Toni Morrison's

The Bluest Eye and Beloved

By

Virginia Costello

B.A., Ripon College, 1986

Presented in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1993

Approved by:

[Signatures]

Chairwoman, Board of Examiners

Dean, Graduate School

Date

Aug. 5, 1993
This thesis uses Emmanuel Mounier’s interpretation of the philosophy of personalism as a lens to examine and interpret the major female characters in Toni Morrison’s novels The Bluest Eye and Beloved. Personalism requires individuals to take responsibility for their actions and for the evils of the world as much as they are able. Before these characters reach personalism, they create themselves: they take responsibility for themselves, their actions, and their growth.

In The Bluest Eye, most characters experience isolation because of the choices they make and because they accept white Western standards of beauty. Since they do not fit these standards, they experience isolation from each other and from themselves. Some characters hear a whisper for self creation from within themselves, but many ignore it because acting on it presents the danger of further isolation. Paradoxically, in their inaction they drift further away from themselves and each other.

In Beloved, slave owners and overseers violate the bodies and souls of their slaves. In response, these slaves both commit murder and help others heal. After slavery, ex-slaves accept and deny their past, their emotions, and their reactions to physical and psychological abuse. They struggle, fail, and retreat into self-imposed isolation. However, by the end of the novel all the major characters have created themselves and many hold personalist values.

In both novels, the major female characters do not directly move from passive, victimized beings to personalist characters. They create and un-create themselves. Some step beyond creating themselves and, without recognizing it as such, move toward personalism. The characters who turn away from personalism regress into isolation, stagnancy, and self-abasement. Those who move toward it find connections with others, growth and self-worth. They remember the past, the pain; they recognize new dangers, know them and persist.
I dedicate this thesis to the homeless
Pecolas, Paulines, Sethes, Beloveds,
to the homeless mothers and children
who come through our doors
at St. Elizabeth Catholic Worker,
and to the millions still on the streets.
Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... ii

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: Isolation and the Creation of Self in Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye .......... 9

Chapter 2: The Development of Self and Personalism in Toni Morrison’s Beloved .... 58

Endnotes ..................................................................................................................... 107

Works Cited .............................................................................................................. 110

Works Consulted ..................................................................................................... 113
Many African American novels like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, contain social statements and attest to the physical, emotional and psychological abuse African Americans suffered at the hands of whites. Often called Freed Slave narratives, these novels directly attack white values. While most of Toni Morrison's novels fit into this genre, she focuses primarily on the characters' experiences, the choices they have made and the reasons for their choices.

Morrison and other contemporary writers like Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, also explore the African American women's response to institutionalized racism and sexism. And in particular, all three writers explore the influences of white values on the lives of African Americans; they portray characters who accept white values and those who do not. Often these writers base their work on personal experience and/or historical fact. Unlike Walker and Angelou, however, Morrison occasionally adds a dimension of magical realism to her novels.

Morrison’s earliest novel, *The Bluest Eye*, provides clear examples of characters who accept white values. In the novel, Morrison criticizes American apathy which prevents individuals from making conscious decisions and creating themselves. In an effort to escape the isolation they experience, some characters in the novel ignore their own ideas, feelings and needs in favor of following the popular
crowd, the rich, the powerful, the "beautiful." Morrison not only challenges the acceptance of these values by black community, but by the white community as well, indirectly suggesting that personal growth, family and community should be more highly valued. She also questions the instant reactionary myth-making (i.e. "Black is beautiful") in which power depends on beauty ("Behind the Making of The Black Book" 89).

In her more recent novels, Beloved and Jazz, characters appear to have a stronger sense of themselves. Morrison’s prosy-poetry style of writing, the occasional use of magical realism, the rich language and the rhythm of the novels (esp. Jazz), propel them beyond simply novels with a social statement; they are works of art which celebrate African American history and culture (and do so without losing sight of where responsibility lies.)

In Jazz, Violet, the main character, searches for understanding, for the reason her husband Joe fell for and later killed an eighteen year old girl. In Beloved Sethe, also the main character, struggles with her past, with the repercussions of living in and later escaping slavery, and with the choices she has made. Although influenced by white society and its values, characters in this novel struggle to create themselves despite the odds, the injustices, and the isolation they endure; they fight for and sometimes maintain their individuality and their culture. Although the characters in Jazz also attempt to create themselves, this paper will be limited to The Bluest Eye and Beloved.

One of Morrison’s major concerns in her novels, Marie Umeh contends,
revolves around "African American people’s failure to be their brother’s keeper" (37). Although she focuses on African Americans, Morrison’s concern extends to all people. She harkens back old days when neighbors took care of each other. She states,

If they were sick, other people took care of them; if they were old,
other people took care of them; if they were mad, other people
provided a small space for them, or related to their madness or tried to
find out the limits to their madness. (qtd in Stepto 4-5)

In the novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, several characters make attempts to care for others; some characters eventually succeed (Denver), whereas others fail (Pecola). Under closer examination, we see and understand the reasons characters do or do not care for themselves.

The characters in *Beloved* move through victimization to self-awareness and later to personalism, a philosophy which encourages individuals to take responsibility for their actions and as much as they are able, for the evils of the world. This move is not a steady one. Characters learn, forget and must relearn lessons about themselves, their environment and other people around them.

In *The Bluest Eye* the characters often appear as victims and their unethical or harsh behavior is chalked up to societal pressures. A closer look reveals that although the pressures of society play a major role in the events of the characters’ lives, the characters themselves remain responsible for their choices, for their actions. In *Beloved*, on the other hand, although the pressures of society influence characters’
lives, and characters are victimized by the system, they make more successful attempts at creating themselves and on occasion, without characters, or perhaps the author recognizing it as such, act in what I describe as a personalist manner.

Unlike the contemporary self-help movement, personalism is a complex philosophy which includes selected ideas from traditional philosophers like Marx, Hegel and Kierkegaard. It has roots in theological thought and has been influenced by "Greek metaphysical and Biblical religious motifs of the dominant Western theological tradition" (Lavely 107). As a precursor to existentialism, personalism discusses the old problem of body and mind: it rests on the premise that the self must be created, that is, it does not exist at birth.

Emmanuel Mounier, a French philosopher and Neo-scholastic, defined the concept in his book *Personalism* written in 1950 and translated by Philip Mairet in 1952. Other philosophers, like Jacques Maritain maintain similar definitions of personalism. Relying most heavily on Mounier’s definition, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement espoused this philosophy as a way of life and began to live their lives in personalist manner by literally doing the works of mercy: clothing the naked, sheltering the homeless, feeding the hungry, etc. And using their literal interpretation of Mounier’s philosophy as a lens with which to interpret Morrison’s novels, we can clearly see the characters’ tremendous struggles. We watch them begin the unconscious embrace of, as well as the denial of, personal responsibility.
Creating the self, a step in the process of embracing personalism, entails a struggle for growth. Characters attempt to develop themselves by heightening their awareness of their thoughts, emotions, desires. In their attempt to seek truth and happiness for themselves and their families, they take responsibility for themselves, their actions and acquire knowledge about their own and others' experience. Creating the self includes part of what Mounier calls the essence of a person: "the living activity of self-creation, of communication and of attachment, that grasps and knows itself, in the act, as the movement of becoming personal. To this experience no one can be conditioned or compelled" (xviii). Some of Morrison's characters refuse to listen while others, because of their distance from the world, their isolation, don't or cannot hear the call for self-creation from within themselves. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola and Pauline Breedlove's isolation discourage their attempts to create themselves. When we examine the causes of their isolation, their existence, the choices they have made, the characters gain dimension.

A more detailed definition of personalism includes the emergence of the creative personality which can be read throughout the history of the world:

It appears as a struggle between two contrary tendencies, of which one is a constant trend towards depersonalization. This is seen not only in matter itself, which indeed is impersonality, passivity and indifference, for it subsides into entropy (degradation of energy) and into sameness or repetition as its natural end. It attacks life, reduces its urge, degrades species to the monotonous repetition of the typical, makes
discovery degenerate into automatism, curbs vital audacity within
systems of security from which inventiveness disappears, prolongs
many movements by inertia till they work against their own purpose.
Finally, it lowers the tension of social life and the life of the spirit by
the relaxations of habit, of routine, of generalized ideas, and of diurnal
gossip. (Mounier 7)

On this side of the struggle, or in this tendency, In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola and
Pauline Breedlove provide excellent examples of what happens to characters who do
not, perhaps cannot or make little attempt at, creating themselves. They occasionally
struggle to pull themselves out of passivity and indifference, but often fail.

Characters in *Beloved* also have similar tendencies but unlike the characters in
*The Bluest Eye*, they gain ground. For example, as a teenager and young mother,
Sethe fights slavery for a short period of time, then falls back, remaining stagnant for
eighteen years. By the end of the novel, Morrison leaves us with a sense of hope that
Sethe will continue to fight, to create herself. Her daughter Denver succeeds in
creating herself after years of indifference and passivity.

The other tendency Mounier describes, that which Denver explores at the end
of the novel, includes the **movement toward personalization** in which,
life takes on the appearance of an accumulation of energy progressively
organized into more and more complex nuclei of indeterminacy: a fan
of possibilities is thus opened to the **free choice of the individual**, according to biological predisposition, for the formation of centers of
personality. (Mounier, my emphasis, 7)

Sethe's struggles provide the most vivid examples of this tendency; she struggles to find and make choices, choices other characters may or may not have chosen, choices that in their original intent were meant to free, but which in fact imprisoned. From this struggle between the two tendencies personalism arises and celebrates the struggle.

In The Revolution of the Heart, a book about the Catholic Worker Movement, Daniel DiDomizio summarizes and simplifies personalism. He writes that personalism includes taking responsibility for creating one's self, and combatting evil and correcting what is wrong in the world as far as one is able (223). Unlike Denver, one of the characters in Beloved who eventually creates herself, many of the characters in Morrison's first novel (e.g., Pecola) represent the antithesis of personalism; they hide from confrontation and growth. They move toward depersonalization. The characters in Morrison's novels do not consciously embrace personalism, nor do they acknowledge its existence in their lives. However, by noticing the struggles between the tendencies of the characters, we can trace and better understand personalism and the struggles of the characters.

And finally, personalism "demonstrates that the human subject cannot be nourished by auto-digestion [digestion of the self]; that one can possess only so much as one gives, or only that to which one gives oneself; and that no one can find salvation, either spiritual or social or social, in himself [herself]" (Mounier 21).
Without recognizing it as such, characters provide examples of personalism.

Mounier affirms:

the absolute value of the human person, describing the true personalist as one who assumes a stance of availability to others as subject rather than object, and takes upon herself the joys and troubles of the other in generosity and faithfulness. (O’Conner 92)

Although Toni Morrison may not even be aware of the philosophy of personalism, her novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, provide examples of characters’ struggle or lack of struggle to create themselves, to live in a personalist manner.

More importantly, however, by noticing where self-creation occurs and applying the personalist philosophy to female characters within these novels, readers witness the movement from passive characters to personalist characters. Characters do not move directly from victimized and non-retaliating beings to active beings who attempt to claim and to fight against heavy odds in order to create themselves and, albeit unconsciously, live according to personalist values. Characters create and uncreate themselves.

Morrison respects difficulties characters endure because of race, class, sex and economic status, and yet holds them responsible for their actions. She does not imply that all characters had the same opportunities, but she portrays the successful characters as ones who have made the most out of what they were given.
Isolation and The Creation of Self

in Toni Morrison’s

The Bluest Eye

Chapter 1
Unlike Toni Morrison's most recent novels, *Jazz* (1992) and *Beloved* (1987), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), her first novel, received little acclaim. Critics describe the novel as: a "pessimistic narrative" (Royster 35), "Afro-American culture in process" (Harris 68) and/or a feminist revision of Ellison's *Invisible Man* (Awkward 1). These interpretations contain valid assertions, but critics often overlook an important issue in *The Bluest Eye*. Many critics agree on her underlying message, that of questioning societal values, but few focus on the characters’ struggle (or lack thereof) to create themselves. As I have indicated earlier, from the personalist perspective, creating the self entails developing the self by heightening the awareness of and taking responsibility for self and actions. It also includes acquiring knowledge about one's own and others' experience. Characters in *The Bluest Eye* seldom attempt to create themselves because, in part, they are isolated.

Many of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* experience isolation from the norm and from the ideal, which often results in isolation from self. The definition of isolation, within the context of this novel and as an element in itself, entails a separation (often an unwanted one) of characters from others, from their history, their culture, a separation which lessens their ability to create themselves. When analyzed, the character's isolation serves as a direct criticism of North American society's values which oppress African Americans and other non-whites. The criticism focuses on the values that determine the standards for physical beauty and those who accept the notion of romantic love. These values "flourish in insecurity and culminate in disillusion" (Somerville 18). Royster defines these North American values: "Beauty
is the facial image of the white American female stereotype and love is emotional attachment or dependency" (40). This Western standard of beauty devalues the physical beauty of African Americans because it encourages people to worship whiteness.

Western standards also stress the importance of maleness and wealth. The only thing black males have of worth, according to Western standards, is their maleness. According to these standards, males have power over others, males protect and provide for their families. These standards distort black males' vision of themselves and their families because as poor black men, they do not have the power to protect themselves and their families from white people. Often black fathers do not have the means to provide the basic needs, like food and shelter, for their family. Western standards warp black males' vision of themselves as fathers, and of their children. Black fathers' poor self-image and the acceptance of the standards also causes them to devalue their children. Black fathers, like Cholly, notice their children's powerlessness and their expectations, and recognize their own inability to protect and provide for their offspring.

The standard also vastly oppresses females in The Bluest Eye, as the standards focus on females. It devalues all women by proposing a women's worth lies simply in her physical appearance. Wildfred Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems call it "the domination of blacks by the existing American standards of beauty: blue eyes, blond hair, and white skin" ("The Damaging Look" 10). Okonjo Ogunyemi claims the novel presents an indirect attack of the values of the white majority through
presentation of these values (354). Simple analysis presents evidence of a more direct attack.

The standards for the mythical North American family life do not end with physical beauty or romantic love. In the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*, and in the novel's seven subsequent sections, a portion of a condensed primary reader appears. Each section of the novel is preceded by a short paragraph from a child's first *Dick and Jane* reader. These paragraphs foreshadow the distortion of the North American ideal. In the beginning of the novel, the same paragraph from the reader appears three times. The first paragraph appears with punctuation and adequate spaces between words and sentences. In the second paragraph, punctuation disappears and by the third paragraph words and sentences simply become unspaced letters. Single paragraphs from the primary reader precede each of the seven sections in the novel and are thematically tied to the respective chapters. The seven elements include: a House and yard, a Family, a Father, a Mother, Friends, a Cat and a Dog. Each paragraph from the primary reader foreshadows the inversion of the idyllic North American life, provides "a bitter gloss on key phrases from the novel’s preface" and becomes plot elements, after "they are inverted to fit the realities of Pecola’s world" (Hedin 50).

Pecola lives in a store front, not a House, fears her Family, is raped by her Father, beaten and blamed by her Mother and finally invents an invisible Friend to comfort her. Not only do the only Dog and Cat associated with her die, but they die violently in front of her eyes. In providing a complete inversion for every aspect of
the North American myth of family life, Morrison deconstructs the myth (Awkward 59).

In an interview, Morrison said that Pecola "does the white trip because of the society in which she lived and very importantly because of the Black people who wanted her to be like that" (Tignor 25). Morrison uses the primary reader as a means of comparison, not only to show how culturally mutilated Afro-American families who adopt these values become, but also as a direct criticism of North American values, the American ideal and Americans who accept these values instead of questioning them. Although Raymond Hedin suggests the people in the primary reader are "healthy" and "supportive," Awkward disagrees, asserting that the primary family members respond in a surface context (59). Their emotional estrangement "suggested by the family's inability to respond to Jane's desire for play," implies their surface response (Awkward 59). So Morrison implies that the primer family members are not only an unhealthy model for Afro-Americans, but also as an inherently unhealthy model for all people because the model encourages self-centeredness instead of personal growth and community-centeredness. The paragraphs from the primary reader portray the family as happy; they laugh and smile, but their lack of response to Jane implies that they do not respond to each other's needs either.

Through the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, and the inversion of the seven elements of the primary reader, Morrison criticizes society's values, particularly the popular standards of beauty, and all who accept them. Claudia and Frieda, framing
characters (i.e. characters whose actions begin and end the novel), symbolize those who learn from their own and others' experience, and achieve some degree of success in their attempt to create themselves. Pecola, on the other hand, represents the victim (however, Morrison does not completely eliminate Pecola's responsibility to struggle to create herself). Pauline represents those who blindly accept society's values and make little attempt to create themselves. The causes of Pecola and Pauline's inability or reluctance to create themselves stem, in part, from the isolation they experience. By exploring the causes and effects of isolation as Pauline and Pecola Breedlove experience it in their home, family life, childhood, relationships with friends and strangers as well as by noticing and comparing the choices they and other female characters have made, we can reach an understanding of Pauline's actions, (and her inability or unwillingness to create herself), and determine responsibility for Pecola's tragic life. However, before discussing Pecola and Pauline's isolation, we must briefly examine and classify the types of isolation.

In Morrison's work, many of the characters who do not fit the North American ideal either physically and/or financially, spend their lives struggling for acceptance by others as well as self-acceptance. Isolated from the North American ideal because of a circumstance beyond their control, (i.e. the color of their skin) they honor those who come closest to the ideal. The degree of isolation the characters experience depends not only on who, in their community, in their family, has had the
most influence on their lives, but also on the choices the individual characters have made. Careful documentation of the causes and effects as well as the forms and degrees of isolation characters experience provides further insight.

The causes of the characters' isolation can be broken into two main categories. In the first category, the character maintains some control or has a choice as to whether or not isolation will occur. For example, some characters have a choice as to whether or not physical and emotional distance exists between themselves and others. They also have choices as to whether they will conform to society's norms or if they will rebel. In *The Bluest Eye*, the prostitutes' rebellion occurs almost naturally, whereas in *Sula*, Sula makes conscious decisions about her rebellion. As sexually active young adults, the prostitutes discover men will pay for sex, and they quickly become prostitutes. Sula chooses to leave her home town, to create a physical distance which also creates an emotional distance between her and Nel (as they never talk or write while Sula travels). When she returns to town, she chooses not to do what other people expect of her; she does not marry and have children. Proof of emotional distance may be hard to demonstrate if physical evidence is lacking, however the distance can often be witnessed in the characters' words, actions and especially in their relationships with one another. This first category of isolation focuses on characters' ability to chose. It shows how characters like Sula, have made some choices, have taken some control in their lives.

In the second isolation category, which all characters experience at some point in their lives, they have no control, no choice as to whether they will be accepted by
others. Most basically, they cannot decide the color of their skin or eyes. Nor can they decide their sex, age, shape of their bodies and often have little choice as to their class or the size of their income. They cannot consciously decide the state of their sanity either.

For example, everyone adores Maureen Peal, a middle class brown skinned girl, as they consider her attractive and as her parents have money. Frieda, Claudia and Pecola would like to be middle class and live like Maureen (with enough money to buy ice cream), but have no control over their parents’ income. Pecola also wishes for white skin, blond hair, blue eyes, but cannot change them. She desperately wants the children in her class, her teachers and society, to accept and love her, but they do not. She cannot control how the children, teachers or others treat her, yet she maintains some control over her own response to their treatment.

Not only do both these types of isolation produce negative feelings of self-worth, but other harmful effects, like distrust of strangers as well as of friends, reverberate though the characters’ communities causing fear, hatred and continual internal and interpersonal conflict. This isolation also stems from ignorance, misunderstanding or misinterpretation and/or apathy.

When outside pressures become unbearable, characters, like Pauline and Pecola isolate themselves as a means of survival. Extended isolation at an early age often deters and eventually prevents characters, like Pecola, from creating themselves. The line between chosen and non-chosen isolation vacillates with external pressures and the blame for Pecola’s tragic life shifts. By narrating Pecola’s tragic life,
Morrison not only criticizes North American ideals, but by giving the history of the characters who abuse Pecola and the choices they have made, Morrison shifts some of the blame back on individuals in her immediate community.

The main female characters in *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline and Pecola Breedlove, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, confront many forms of isolation in their lives. All four females confront isolation due to their sex, their class and their skin color. Unlike Claudia and Frieda however, Pauline and Pecola also confront isolation within their family. Claudia and Frieda maintain fairly healthy relationships with their family, but Pecola and Pauline Breedlove's relationships are physically and emotionally abusive.

The extent of the Breedlove family's isolation from each other, from the community and society in general, exceeds their ability to cope and still lead satisfying lives. For a short time the Breedloves live in a House, one of the major possessions desired when trying to reach the North American ideal. But they move into a storefront because Cholly sets the house on fire. The building they live in appears "irritating and melancholy" especially when compared to other black families' "gray frame houses" (*Morrison The Bluest Eye* 30). This portrayal of the Breedloves' apartment contrasts intensely with the ideal house and emphasizes the Breedloves' financial isolation. It is not only the building itself, nor the sparsely furnished storefront, but, more abstractly, the poverty it represents that isolates the Breedloves.⁷
The Breedlove Family themselves cannot comfort each other. They represent
the inverted North American myth of family. The inversion can be traced back to
their isolation from themselves and others. Their isolation consists of a combination
of poverty, devalued blackness, and their conviction of their own ugliness which sets
them apart from other poor black families. "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" (TBE 34). The family accepts it "without direct
coercion" and each member wears it in differently (Byerman, "Intense Behaviors"
449). Cholly's belongs to him; Pauline applies it to her martyrdom; Sammy uses his
as a weapon, and Pecola hides behind hers. Just as Pauline blames her floppy foot
for lack of love and attention, Pecola blames her "ugliness" for the same (Pettis 28).
Although it provides a means of survival, their conviction of ugliness destroys any
healthy family relationship they might have had (TBE 34-35).

Contrary to the "happy" parents in the primary reader, the Breedloves, with
their roles as parents distorted, constantly fight. Dickerson asserts,

with its worship of whiteness, maleness and power and its high
validation of the land, wealth and acquisitions, with its hatred and
exclusion of blackness and its fierce disdain of femaleness, frailty and
want, Western Society has warped black fatherhood [and motherhood]
and consequently sacrificed the children. (123)

The Breedloves' anger, produced in part by their inarticulateness (Holloway and
Demetrakopoulos 41), searches for an outlet.° Cholly and Pauline do not
communicate verbally when they fight, only physically. With no focus for their anger, as poverty is too abstract, and no words to express it verbally, they focus on each other and their children. So Pauline blames Cholly and he blames her. Cholly's physical presence presents a concrete focus for her anger. His "habitual drunkenness and orneriness, provided them both with the material they needed to make their lives tolerable" (TBE 36). In the beginning of the novel, Pauline starts a fight because she needs Cholly's drunkenness to keep away the rest of her pain, the pain of her isolation. Although this crisis further isolates her, it, like her anger, creates a sense of being and distracts her from the misery of her life. Their fighting "relieves the tiresomeness of poverty" (TBE 36). In creating a sense of being it also temporarily creates a crisis and postpones any attempt at creating themselves. Pettis observes,

Pauline's aggressiveness would seem to distinguish significantly between her response to violence and Pecola's passivity, but in response to the psychological violence perpetrated on black women by the dominant culture, Pauline, like Pecola, practices passivity rather than resistance and succumbs to a fantasy of reality.... (28)

Pecola deals with the tension by trying to make herself disappear, but fails because she cannot make her eyes disappear and they are everything to her. Sammy feigns sleep, and wishes his father dead because he cannot handle listening to his parents' continual fighting. But if Pauline killed Cholly or Cholly killed her, both Pauline and Cholly would also be killing themselves, killing the person who helps them survive by allowing them to focus on the crisis instead of creating themselves. The Breedloves
unsuccessfully attempted to "fight" poverty, and although resigned to living in it, they continue to desperately search for some relief from it.

With both the House and the Family inverted, we need to explore the Mother's, Pauline's, adult life and discern her history as well. Pauline's history, her childhood, the isolation that occurs in her life, the motivation behind her violence, and the choices she has made, provides an understanding of the dysfunctional family she helps create. Her history also makes her a more sympathetic character. Pauline experiences neglect as a child growing up in a poor family with ten other children and blames others' impassivity on the accident that left her with a floppy foot. The foot saves her from total anonymity, distinguishes her from other siblings. She decides it is the reason no one ever gave her a nickname or paid any special attention to her. Used as her "magical charm" (Somerville 20), the foot first attracts Cholly to her. Although it comforts her, it also separates her, excludes her. She blames it for "a general feeling of separateness and unworthiness" (TBE 88). At this point in her process of becoming, blaming is her survival method, the easiest thing she can do. Because of her youth, her lack of experience, her isolation from others, she does not attempt to create herself; she survives by not questioning.

During Pauline's early adulthood, she enjoys the quiet times when the children attend school: "The stillness and isolation both calmed and energized her" (TBE 90). But her contentment doesn't last. As a child, she has little privacy, due to all of her siblings, then for a time she achieves a balance of people and quiet. During her time
of balance, Pauline begins to create and love herself by thinking about her future goals. At the same time she expects her prince to come and take care of her. This way she will not have to care for or create herself after all. Just when the balance between privacy and people in Pauline's life is upset by the twins leaving, Cholly arrives and resets the balance—for a while. But, moving north with Cholly, Pauline eventually finds the isolation overbearing and destructive. Toward the end, after she fails to create a happy family like Dick and Jane's, fails to live up to the ideal, she creates her own reality, maintains her own privacy, breaking connections with her family and destroying it in the process.

When Pauline moves up north with Cholly, the separation from familiar territory (family, southern culture, southern women and her elders) provides some of the conditions that produce and encourage the growth of isolation and dissatisfaction. The isolation causes Pauline to experience "a loss of center" (Christian 66). At first Pauline tries to keep house and enjoy married life. When she is not accepted by other women, she tries to conform to other women's values by buying clothes and wearing high heels. But her language, her limp and the fact that she does not really want the new clothes, renders her compliance unsuccessful and diminishes her self-esteem.

The northern black women, her supposed equals, some of the only people she need not take orders from, give indirect orders by not accepting her. She attempts to act and look like them to gain their acceptance. So, in effect, she takes orders from them too. Other black women face similar forms of isolation due to race and class but, being a southern women in the north, Pauline faces deeper isolation which
enhances her desire for acceptance and renders her more susceptible to acceptance of
the standards of beauty. Yet at one time, Pauline saw "beauty in blackness, in the
voice of Ivy, one of the black women in her Kentucky church choir" (Tignor 25).
Initially proud of her culture, she accepts the North American standard of beauty and
forfeits her history in the process. Her isolation increases as the only relationship she
has experienced in the north, that with her husband, dissolves into arguments about
money.

In order to fight her isolation and loneliness, Pauline attends the movies. But
because they do not depict reality, because they display a false sense of love and
beauty, they denigrate Pauline's beauty, her existence, her life. They destroy her
self-love. They "made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard" (TBE 97).
The ray of light from the projector, Madonne Minor asserts, "defines the boundaries
of existence...and projects a white male vision" which rejects Pauline (186). Minor
later calls her "education" at the movies, "yet another violation of male on female,
white on black" (186). The popular notion of beauty and romantic love become her
reality. Pauline equates "physical beauty with virtue" and in doing so, "she stripped
her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap" (TBE 97). Samuels and
Hudson-Weems maintain that Pauline "allows herself to subscribe" to the popular idea
of beauty ("The Damaging Look" 26). They imply that Pauline could have chosen to
invent her own version of beauty, rather than accept the standard version. At this
point, Pauline's semi-unconsciously resists creating herself. She could have
questioned the myths, redefined her idea of physical beauty.
The reason for her choice arises, understandably, from feeling inadequate and simply not wishing to confront a world that despises her. She reacts by denying herself and joining everyone in their dislike, which only enhances her self-contempt.

And although she considers her physical appearance inadequate, she defends herself against her own accusation of imperfection by building an impeachable fortress of morality. She was an "active Church woman, did not smoke or carouse, defended herself mightily against Cholly, rose above him in every way" (TBE 102). Her ugliness does not condemn her, for "her virtues" are "intact." (Somerville 21)

Although, her acceptance of the myth does not destroy her, as she still functions, it eventually invalidates her and her family. In her mind she collects contempt for her "ugly" daughter, her husband, her son and all others who do not, or cannot, conform to the idyllic physical beauty mold or play the part of a romantic lover. She accepts Cholly’s mistakes, thrives on them, but uses her "fortress of morality" to ignore her own mistakes. In her attempt to gain acceptance and connect with others outside her family, she isolates herself further by isolating her family.

The brown speck on her tooth serves as a metaphor for Pauline’s acceptance of the standards of beauty, love and materialism, and lies unnoticed until, just as her acceptance of the North American ideals destroys her life without her realizing her responsibility in the matter, it ruins the tooth. It destroys without her realizing it was even growing. She never paid much attention to the speck, to herself, to her own health, growth. Just as Pauline’s acceptance of society’s standard of beauty and
materialism destroy her and her family’s life, the speck destroys her tooth.

After the tooth breaks she stops fixing her hair like Jean Harlow’s. Instead her meanness increases (TBE 98). She doesn’t question society’s values or the accepted standard of beauty; she merely accepts them. She has the strength and ability to question and challenge society’s values, but an attempt to do so presents too great a risk; challenging society’s values would mean questioning and challenging herself too. The movies provide a quick fix, an easier way to survive the isolation and chaos.

After she realizes her failure to achieve the movie image of physical beauty, she settles for acting, striving to become the ideal servant. Since her attempt to look like Jean Harlow (a movie star) and gain the attention and affection of other people failed, she decides to act as white society tells her to (i.e., docile, obedient, efficient and unseen, and loyal to employers), and in this way, gain acceptance. In the process, she sacrifices her attention to her family, which she considers a small sacrifice in terms of all she receives from her employers. By neglecting her family, she can survive without having to question society’s values. White society’s values and black community’s acceptance of these values creates a vacuum that sucks Pauline into it and swallows her identity, but not without her acceptance of these values.

As part of her acceptance of standard values, Pauline decides to have her second child, Pecola, in the hospital like other women. She wants the attention, the recognition but receives only curiosity and abuse (TBE 99). The doctors treat her as an object; they insult her. Then she rebels against their assertion that black women
don't feel as much pain as white women by yelling during childbirth. She rejects their insults and fights back. Unlike Pecola, she doesn't swallow all of the insults people hurl at her. For the first time in her adult life, she rebels. Her rebellion shows her ability to question other people's treatment of her and respond when openly verbally insulted. But because society's values are abstract and because she fails to recognize their direct insult (i.e., that she is ugly and worth little), she does not rebel against them.

Paradoxically, Pecola's birth also creates alienation for Pauline. Pecola is born smart (she knows how to nurse), yet because her mother sees her as ugly, Pecola's isolation begins upon her arrival into the world. When Pauline talked to Pecola while she was in the womb, Pauline pictured her baby as "beautiful," like the women in the movies, but Pecola looks like her.

Pauline's attempt to eliminate or at least lessen her loneliness, her isolation, by working and conforming to standard values, results in her discomfort even in her own home. Eventually she stops maintaining her own house. All the work she does at home remains fruitless, as nothing lasts or is appreciated, whereas her work at the Fisher family's home provides visual results and affirmation. In the Fisher family's home the results of her work are more valued, appreciated by people who live the North American ideal, by people valued in society. Not only does the Fisher family encourage her, but the entire world agrees with them, praising her acceptance of their standards and making creating herself appear unnecessary (TBE 102).

When the Fisher family bestows the nickname Polly on her, her loyalty to
them increases and her loyalty to her own family decreases; even her name at home changes to Mrs. Breedlove. Nicknaming, Harris claims, "is an old venerated tradition in the Black community, and not having been given one, Pauline felt excluded" (Harris 71). The Fisher family’s nickname for Pauline breaks though this one form of isolation, into a friendly, but false, familiarity. She recognizes it as false, but willingly accepts it because false familiarity is better than none. Although the Fisher family treats her as a second class citizen, their acceptance and reliance on her confronts her and makes her feel safe; it is easier than struggling to fight the norms, than thinking and making decisions for herself, decisions which other people may not like or accept.

Through other black women, the Fisher family, her own and the North American people’s acceptance of the standards, Pauline continues to distance herself from herself more and more. She short-circuits familial connections, especially between herself and her daughter, whom she abuses. Even though Joyce Pettis reminds us, "Pauline’s responses to her daughter are the responses of a woman also victimized" (29), ultimately, Pauline remains responsible for her situation; she has had choices and chances. And so Pecola, like Pauline, although extremely limited in her ability to choose, as shall be explored later, must be held, at least partially responsible for the choices she made.

Pauline directs her anger at those society considers insignificant—her children. When her children are born, not only are they devalued by society, but by their mother as well. She expresses her anger and frustration by physically and verbally
abusing them: "Sometimes I'd catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I'd feel sorry for them, but I couldn't seem to stop" (TBE 98, my emphasis). Not only does the abuse appear uncontrollable, but even after she recognizes it, she cannot prevent herself from abusing again. She finds herself beating them. She does not realize she is abusing them until the beating has started. In her lack of cognitive thought, of considering the effects of her actions, she hurts the ones she loves, destroys any kind of security or self-love her children may have felt. She destroys their innocence. She also hurts herself and lessens her self-esteem. Had she thought about disciplining her children beforehand, she might not have physically abused them.

Pauline lacks control of her emotions, because, in part, of her lack of awareness. Holloway asserts that through the conversations with Jesus, Pauline attempts to deal with "a consciousness over which she has little control" (40). The direct correlation between Pauline's acceptance of the standards and the violence she inflicts on her children, provides criticism of both the individual, Pauline, and the values she accepted. At this point, Pauline has lost some control over her life, her actions, and moves further away from creating and taking responsibility for her self.

Beside beating them and generating contempt for her children, Pauline encourages their acceptance of the standards. Not surprisingly, she thereby teaches her children both respectability and fear: "into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, a fear of other people, fear of life" (TBE 102). The fear produces isolation, self-doubt and contributes to Pecola's madness. By encouraging the
acceptance of the standards, Pauline also severs her ties to her folk culture, and "short circuits any connections she could pass on to Pecola that would aid her in reconnection to that culture" (Harris 69). She denies Pecola and Sammy the strength of their history, their culture.

Pauline also denies Pecola her female pride and the history of her female ancestors' struggles. Pauline's inadequate communication skills make it difficult for her to express her feelings; she has no other medium, no art form in which to represent herself or her history. Even though Pauline tells little about the women in the south, she must have interacted with some of them, like the ones who took care of Cholly's Aunt Jimmy: the black women who are strong enough to bale hay and gentle enough to rock babies into sleep (TBE 110), the women like, Ivy, whose voice strengthens others (TBE 90). Pauline could have used these women as role models, instead of accepting standard values.

And so as Demetrakopoulos observes, "besides being cut off from self-knowledge because she is abused and a child, Pecola [like Pauline] is also obstructed and deflected from higher consciousness of self because she is female" (34). The obstruction and deflection occurs because American society ignores and/or devalues women's experience. Western society encourages women of all colors to concern themselves with their physical appearance, not their thoughts or their intellectual growth. In North America, the media often portrays women as objects and therefore women often think of themselves as such. Pauline admires Jean Harlow, her whiteness, her "physical beauty." She does not admire who she is, how she thinks.
Although Pauline never experiences the intensity of Pecola’s experience, and Claudia and Frieda adapt to their environment without destroying themselves, their femaleness also obstructs their growth, as, among other reasons, it encourages the acceptance of the myth.

Pecola and Pauline’s acceptance of the objectification of women also indirectly sanctions the destruction of the mother/daughter relationship. Pauline’s relationship with her daughter never blossoms since, from day one, Pauline equates Pecola’s lack of ‘beauty’ with a lack of worth. When her baby daughter grows up, Pauline does not have adequate communication skills to speak to her, to explain, to share. She instead holds up an image that neither she nor Pecola can ever attain and thereby throws Pecola into a frustrating paradox: trying to attain the unattainable. It also leads to her lack of self-worth and to her lack of voice. Pauline’s encouragement of Pecola to accept standards, even though Pauline doesn’t fit the standards, pushes Pecola further away.

Pauline narrates parts of her story, but as Holloway notices she cannot narrate her entire story because, in her acceptance of the myth, "she has lost her voice" (40). The narrator observes:

So she became and her process of becoming was like most of ours; she developed a hatred for things that mystified or obstructed her [her children, her husband]; acquired virtues that were easy to maintain; assigned herself a role in the scheme of things; and harkened back to simpler times for gratification. (TBE 100)
Through this quote Morrison points out how most people, like Pauline, find the safest way to survive: avoid creating or developing the self, simply accept.

And in acceptance, Pauline, like Cholly and Pecola, remain "frozen in a world of being-for-the-other and consequently live a life of shame, alienation, self-hatred, and inevitable destruction" (Samuels and Hudson-Weems "The Damaging Look" 10-11). Yet, the choices Pauline has made "are grounded in disillusion with self, home, husband and marital relationship" (Pettis 27). This recognition provides a clearer understanding of the reasoning behind her actions and the choices she makes. The isolation she experiences due to her sex, race, class, and childhood history encourages Pauline to accept the standard North American values. She does not consciously understand that accepting the myth further perpetuates the many forms of isolation which, along with other factors, results in the distortion/destruction of her and her family’s life. Her seemingly simple acceptance of the standards backfires. It short-circuits her children’s ability to create themselves by passing on the isolation and low self-esteem she feels. Pauline choose to conform, rather than to question, as conforming is easier then self-confrontation, and the results of her choices now isolate her children and her family. Pauline represents "those who allow the values of the community to dominate them" (Sargent 232). The antithesis of personalism, Pauline represents those who do not create themselves. Like Pauline, Pecola allows the community’s values to dominate her life.

And yet, Pecola doesn’t have as many choices as Pauline had. By exploring
Pecola's character and the isolation she experiences, one can determine whether and/or when, Pecola tries to create herself. Pecola's isolation due to her race, class, sex, age and actions of her family ultimately culminates in the final, irreversible isolation: madness. Other female characters experience isolation for similar reasons, but Pecola's experience is far more traumatic. Harris writes, that even the name Pecola, a formal name, "reminiscent of movies and books, suggests distance rather than claiming" (72). Demetrakopoulos calls her Morrison's symbol of "utter human desolation" (32). When Pecola first appears in the novel, her choices are extremely limited and her ability to create herself minimal. Yet her struggles to create herself give her depth; her small but present ability to choose, gives her character life beyond that of 'the victim.'

In a society that honors rich white young men above all others, Pecola, Frieda and Claudia, as poor black girls, experience feelings of low self-worth. They, like Pauline, experience separation from the ideal. Unlike Frieda and Claudia, Pecola begins her life as an outcast because her mother categorizes her "ugly" moments after her birth. Her isolation from the ideal increases as her parents abuse her spiritually, emotionally and physically, and as her awareness of the standards of beauty (thus her own perceived "ugliness") increases. Gloria Wade-Gayles blames Pauline for Pecola's inability to create herself, calling her "rejecting and cruel--the major participant in the young girl's denial of self and life" (Pettis 27). One of the reasons Frieda and Claudia are not as susceptible to the pressures of society stems from their nurtured childhood, their parents' love and ability to care. Although occasionally
abrasive, Mrs. MacTeer sings and cares for her children’s physical need. And unlike Cholly Breedlove, Mr. MacTeer comes home after work sober. He also protects his children. Cholly’s children need protection from him.

When Pecola first appears in the novel, her isolation is greater than the that of the other girls because her father has caused the family to be "put outdoors" (TBE 17). Being put outdoors is tantamount to total isolation. "There is no place to go" (TBE 8), nor is there anyone to turn to. The action of setting the house on fire causes Cholly, the Father, and his family to be put outdoors. This action, against the norms of the community, was a choice, his choice and he maintains responsibility for the result. However, Pecola and the rest of the Breedloves did not make a choice. Because of Cholly’s actions, they become isolated (further than they already have) from each other, their home, from the normalcy of life.

Claudia, the adult narrator, explains that she and her sister learned to deal with their sense of isolation from main-stream America, their "peripheral existence" because it was abstract (TBE 18). But Pecola’s being put outdoors was a different matter, not one easily dealt with. The only friends Pecola’s age, Claudia and Frieda, recognize the horror, the loneliness of her situation and try to lessen her feeling of isolation, befriend her, make her feel loved. But Pecola’s isolation continues to grow and she hangs on to anything that will make her feel accepted; she focuses outside herself, on accepted, adored images like Shirley Temple, and wants to become like them.

The Shirley Temple image intrigues Pecola. Pecola drinks milk out of the
Shirley Temple cup as often as she can. She wants to stare at Shirley, drink Shirley’s whiteness into her body, but Shirley’s eyes fascinate Pecola the most. Pecola, sold on the blue-eyed-blond North American myth of beauty at a very young age, desires blue eyes which, she believes, would make her beautiful and therefore loved. Barbara Christian calls Pecola’s desire an example of cultural mutilation. She claims Morrison challenges the "unnaturalness of a belief system in which physical beauty is associated with beauty and love is romance" (69). Pauline’s desire to look like Jean Harlow also suggests cultural mutilation. Although during Pauline’s childhood she did not receive nurturing like Frieda and Claudia, she had more of a chance to challenge the standards, than Pecola had. Pecola chooses not to question.

Frieda also loves Shirley Temple but not obsessively. Claudia, on the other hand, rebels against Shirley Temple, her white skin and thus against accepted Western standards of beauty. They also rebel against the degradation anonymous life presents. The adults in the community have accepted these standards of beauty too. When adults give Claudia the doll with blue eyes and blond hair, they cluck in contentment because their daughters have something that they never had. But when Claudia pulls the doll apart, the adults show their outrage. They have accepted the worth of the white dolls, and in turn, of white girls. Claudia doesn’t accept the dolls as beautiful/lovable because that would mean she’s not, which isolates her from the love and respect given white girls. She later accepts the dolls, but never accepts the idealized version of North American life; motivated by shame, she simply adjusts, noticing the change without amelioration (TBE 22). But Pecola accepts the myth
without question, without change or adjustment, and finally becomes obsessed. She constantly thinks about the blue eyes, using them as hope for a better future. In this way she unconsciously takes a step away from reality, toward madness.

By accepting the blue-eyed-blond North American standard of beauty, Pecola, Frieda and Claudia disregard their own physical beauty. Claudia and Frieda accept and incorporate the myth into their lives, but Pecola's desire for blue eyes invades her every thought. Despite the acceptance of the myth Claudia and Frieda retain some self-esteem, but Pecola does not. Pecola lacks supportive people, people who believe she has worth. Claudia and Frieda rely on their parents and each other. Although Pecola desperately searches for someone to love her, she cannot find anyone. Her mother accepts the North American values which prevent her from respecting Pecola and her father, denies all responsibility for creating himself, for helping his children create themselves. So Pecola becomes obsessed with the image that she sees people love, respect and admire. She tries to drink then later eat the "beauty" of little white girls. The isolation she experiences lessens her ability to make choices, to make herself.

Pecola avoids all conflict. Her avoidance helps her cope with her internal struggle between loving herself and wanting blue eyes. It is a partially a self-motivated isolation. She evades anything that will challenge her to take a stand, to admit she has thoughts or feelings of her own (TBE 24-25). In her mind, others' needs (those closer to the ideal) are more important than her own; her wants and needs are inconsequential because she does not fit the ideal. Risking the quiet,
complacent space in which she exists would be too much. She does not risk anything. Surviving day to day demands all her energy. Yet, there is no affirmation of life through this survival. Pecola's isolation, her distance from people, and the lack of love in her life, destroys her ability to express her needs, perhaps even unable to be conscious of them. She is aware of her wants (she wants blue eyes) and mistakes them for her needs (she thinks she needs blue eyes). Like her mother, Pecola's acceptance of the standard images and values isolates her more. Her acceptance intensifies her belief that she has no worth because she is not like them, not like Shirley Temple.

Pecola's insanity is caused, in part, by the negative attention she receives from other children and the lack of attention she receives from her teachers. The bullies torment her and she feels ugly and stupid, the teachers ignore her; she feels less than ugly and stupid; she feels she does not exist. They have taken her humanness, her sense of self. She spends long hours in front of her mirror, "trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (TBE 39). She looks into the mirror not to discover if she is ugly, but to discover the secret of her ugliness. She thinks that if she had blue eyes she'd be beautiful and her family would not argue or abuse each other in front of her (TBE 40). Her own eyes do not compare with those of the blue-eyed beauties she loves so much. Trapped in an impractical wish for change, she cannot see that she does not have to accept the standard values.

Another significant factor isolating Pecola is simply that she is a child. As
children, Frieda and Claudia do not understand much of what adults say, but they can read adults. They listen to the tone of their mother's voice, the words in her songs; they recognize Mr. Henry's "heh-heh" grown-up get-ready-to-lie laugh (TBE 65). Though not as conscious of it as the MacTeer girls, Pecola reads adults too. She hears the impatience of the store keeper, something inside her recognizes that he doesn't see her, but she does not direct her anger at him. However, Pecola cannot read or understand her mother or father's violence. Her lack of understanding makes creating herself nearly impossible.

In the menstruating scene (25-29), Pecola does not understand the physical changes which occur in her body. Her girl-gone-woman pants represents change and creates a separation between her and the MacTeer girls. This type of distance, although it frightens her, is natural. Despite her fear, the girls respect her growth. All the while she remains humble, more out of lack of ego than out of a conscious choice.

The only other Friends Pecola has, the prostitutes, live above her family's storefront apartment, above the squalor. Tignor claims, "the prostitutes, those outcast community women treat Pecola in somewhat of the same way that Pauline treats the Fisher girl" (25). However, Pauline pampers, honors and loves the Fisher girl, whereas the prostitutes accept, tolerate and allow Pecola to do their errands. Pecola always initiates the conversations with Marie (TBE 44). They, in turn, tell her stories, enjoy her company, but do not pamper her. She loves them and they do not despise or ignore her (TBE 43). Although minimal, the attention they give her allows her to
forget her conviction of ugliness and to ask questions. The questioning shows
Pecola’s ability to think on her own. In their company Pecola feels safe enough to
wonder about love and able to think for herself, able to initiate conversations—one of
the few places in the novel she can do so.¹²

As for the prostitutes themselves, Samuels and Hudson-Weems write:

In spite of their unconventionality, and of Claudia’s suspicion
that the women might not be happy, Poland, China, and Miss
Marie live lives that appear more fulfilling than those of
Geraldine, Mrs. MacTeer, or certainly Mrs. Breedlove, a
surname that could have been given to them ...[The prostitutes
remain] unyielding to the point of insubordination and conceit.

("The Damaging Look" 20) ¹³

Even Claudia notices how Marie’s "smile was full, not like the pinched and holding-
back smile of other grown-ups" (TBE 83). The prostitutes make choices, take
responsibility for themselves despite the oppression and isolation they experience.
Their strength lies in their acceptance of themselves and denial of the standard values.
Yet, in this place where society devalues them for being female, black and poor, the
prostitutes’ choices remain minimal. Byerman states, "They are women who do their
work without illusion, self-hatred, or guilt...They respect only the innocents like
Pecola, and truly religious women who they see as having the same honesty and
integrity as themselves" ("Beyond Realism" 60). They think they are honest
because, unlike the other women in the community (e.g., Geraldine), they do not
pretend to have morals. In their abrasive manner, they are honest about their dishonesty. Yet through their lack of morals, their open abuse, their non-discriminatory hatred of men (TBE 47-48), and their selfishness, they, too, stagnate; they do not move beyond struggling for their immediate needs and their dreams remain unreachable. They diminish their ability to create themselves, remaining in a world of being, not of growth.

On the surface it appears that the prostitutes represent those not governed by societal values and yet, perhaps because they so adamantly defy the values, the values inversely and indirectly regulate them. In their anger and desire not to be upstanding women in the community, they accept standards opposite those of "moral" women. Neither the characters who completely accept or those who completely reject the standards, the values, develop themselves with much degree of success.

Even with the prostitutes' respect, and love, Pecola does not appreciate herself as she appreciates the dandelion flower. Despite people calling them weeds, wanting to rid their yards of them, using only the leaves and not recognizing the beauty in the dandelion flowers, Pecola acknowledges their beauty (TBE 41). She does not accept, admire and acknowledge her own beauty because she cannot see it. She admires something that other people do not admire; she wonders why people do not like dandelions, but only for a while. Yet she makes a decision--against the norms--which implies she has some power, some ability to act alone, however small. Although almost the complete victim, she must take some responsibility for creating herself.

Yet, after she leaves Mr. Yacobowski’s store, Pecola doesn’t connect the
change in her feelings about the dandelions to her experience in the store. She does
recognize that the dandelions do not return her affection and shame surges in her.
The trip into the store compounds Pecola's isolation because she recognizes that in
Yacobowski's mind she doesn't even exist, is not worthy of existence. He treats her
as if she were an object. Mounier asserts that treatment of this nature makes the
recipient desperate (23).

Despite her desperation, after Pecola leaves the store, she feels angry: "Anger
stirs and wakes in her; it opens its mouth, like a hot mouthed puppy, laps at the
dredges of her shame" (TBE 43). Like Pauline, she discovers that in anger there is
being. With this new awareness of herself, this discovery, she moves toward self-
development, self-creation. Despite her attempt to hold on to it, her anger and
awareness do not last. Samuel and Hudson-Weems claim that "Pecola can easily
choose anger" (43). But because expressing anger presents risks, it is not an easy
choice for her. She attempts to welcome the anger, and in doing so to create herself,
but fails. Miner asserts, "Before contact with this white male, Pecola creates belief
in both a world and a self; following contact with Yacobowski her conjuring powers
impaired, she abandons the effort" (185). In her struggle, despite the outcome, for a
moment she breathes on her own.

Even the children, except Claudia and Frieda, abuse Pecola. The girls at
school talk behind her back and the boys torment her. One day the school boys hurl
racial insults at Pecola. The insults bite hard because in their contempt for the color
of their own skin, the boys sacrifice her "for their own sake" (TBE 55). Pecola,
unable to defend herself against the boys' insults, responds to the crisis by inhaling the pain. Physically surrounded by them, she does not have the strength to retaliate, to create herself, nor does she believe something, some beauty, some strength exists inside herself. In this instance, she is the victim.

Her isolation from herself, from who she is, from what she looks like, surfaces again in the recognition that she cannot even see her own worth or beauty, nor is she ever be able to see it. The lack of awareness of her beauty contributes to her destruction. If she did not accept other people's idea of beauty, she could see her own raw human beauty. Yet again, her chances to see it, to struggle for growth, remain minimal, although present.

Unlike Pecola, Claudia and Frieda have an awareness of their beauty, thus of their worth. But their awareness of their poverty, of their physical selves, surfaces when Maureen Peal arrives at school. Claudia and Frieda compare themselves to her wealth and "beauty." The MacTeer girls react by hating Maureen and creating derogatory names for her. Claudia imagines slamming the locker door on her hand (TBE 54). Later she tries to find a way to maneuver Maureen's fur muff into the gutter. They rebel against everyone's acceptance and admiration of Maureen. Yet after Maureen makes the first move toward friendship, Frieda is willing to be friends with her, whereas Claudia promises nothing.

They know a friendship with Maureen would be dangerous, not only because it crosses class and economic boundaries, but because of everyone's admiration for Maureen's physical appearance. Isolated from her economically as well as by the hue
of their skin, the MacTeer girls fear Maureen because of the power she has, and "the thing that makes her beautiful, and not us" (TBE 62). A friendship would break the isolation, lessen the distance between the poor MacTeers and the "rich" Maureen Peal. However, like the false spring day, "the deluding warmness," Maureen's surface attempt at friendship fails (TBE 54). Her insensitivity, pretended interest and pseudo-generosity shows itself as cold hard curiosity. Barbara Christian observes that "trapped by her own appearance as they are, she [Maureen] may not move beyond the assessment of her own worth...Like Pecola, Maureen is assigned to an unnatural place in the order of human society" (74). Seemingly content, although selfish and self-centered, Maureen too suffocates in the great North American myth. Morrison uses Maureen, and later Geraldine, to explore how the acceptance of the myth also distorts the lives of the characters who come closest to the standard idealized beauty.

The MacTeer girls' rebellion against the myth manifests itself in their verbal, then their physical attack on the boys who abuse Pecola, and later, on Maureen when she insults them. When the girls discover the boys abusing Pecola, they rescue her. But as Harris observes, their brief "patterns of caring...never reach her strongly enough to reshape her opinion of herself" (73). Although their rescue saves her from the boys, it does not empower Pecola because she does not assist in it; she takes no action; thus receives no self-esteem.

Later Maureen returns insults and runs away from the girls. Adults frown at Claudia, Frieda and Pecola. Pecola "folds into herself like a pleated wing" (TBE 61). Once again she doesn't spit out the misery; but she accepts it, lets it lap into her eyes.
She doesn’t seem to appreciate that Claudia and Frieda fight for her as well as for themselves. She does not pull herself away from the insult; she accepts it as truth as she accepts many other insults as truth. For the second time in one day her self-defense, her self-preservation fails her.

In contrast to Pecola’s inability to retaliate against those who oppress her, Claudia and Frieda rebel in an effort to protect Pecola and themselves. Their rebellion demonstrates their ability to reject the North American myth, to preserve their self-esteem. And by defending Pecola, they express their own self-acceptance (Sargent 233). Yet they find Maureen Peal’s insults difficult to forget. The combination of the "honey voices" of parents and aunts when they talk about the white dolls, the "obedience in the eyes of their [the girl’s] peers, the special way the teachers look at the Maureen Peals of the world" weakens the girls’ defense (TBE 61). In the beginning of the novel, Frieda and Claudia enjoyed and felt comfortable in their skin, but after the Maureen Peal episode, discomfort surfaces. Compared to Pecola, who never felt comfortable in her skin, never loved herself and has no one to love her either, their discomfort appears manageable. This rebellion empowers them.

Claudia, as the adult narrator, appears to have overcome this discomfort. Sargent even goes as far to assert that,

By making Claudia a point-of-view character, Morrison explores the imaginative act that is required to make a person whole...[and] suggest[s] that Claudia...is free of the standards of the white world that the rest of the community has used to judge
Claudia steps back from her history, from her pain, by telling the story and
overcomes the myth in the process. Although not as strong as Claudia, Frieda too
survives and continues on to create herself.

Like Maureen Peal, Geraldine cannot move beyond the fact she feels closer to
the ideal and therefore supposedly worth more than other darker skinned women. She
is one of the hypocritical "upstanding" women of the community who the prostitutes
despise. She, unlike the prostitutes, but like the girls from places like Mobile, learns
the "correct" way to behave: to eliminate the "funkiness" which is her individuality,
to isolate herself from herself. Neither Geraldine nor the girls create themselves, nor
do they question the values given them by society. Geraldine is convinced that her
"funkiness" implies corruption; she devotes herself to wiping it out, to constantly
watching for any tell-tale signs in her family and herself.

Geraldine (and others) depend on the existence of Pecola as the other half of
their equations. They make Pecola the object and themselves the subject, and thereby
succeeding in creating the other, but they are still unable to create a self (Meyers 42).
Geraldine’s and the Mobile girls’ communities reward them with admiration. White
society rewards them with a vague sense of acceptance or, more accurately, of
tolerance.

Geraldine not only accepts but relies on the white values which renders her
emotions invalid and separates her from a fulfilling life. She cannot even emotionally
relate to her child, only to his and her husband’s physical needs. Yet, she made a
choice; she separated herself, rejected her history. She continually denies her blackness in order to maintain her place in society (Otten 15). Thus Geraldine lives a lie and becomes part of the societal pressures which encourage others to act like her.

Pecola’s class and economic situation further isolate her as she unwittingly becomes the recipient of Geraldine’s disgust with the poor and unrefined in what Samuels and Hudson-Weems call "the most damaging intraracial confrontation related to color" ("The Damaging Look" 12). Otten adds, Geraldine "sees in Pecola the other self she has so long fought, the black self she fears herself to be" (15).

Pecola’s acceptance of the North American standards of beauty render her powerless as the "pretty milk-brown lady in the pretty gold-and-green house" rejects her. Even the statue of the old white Jesus has "sad and unsurprised eyes" (TBE 76). Although Geraldine doesn’t raise her voice, as that wouldn’t be dignified, she devastates Pecola when she says,"You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (TBE 75). Stunned by Geraldine’s beauty, Pecola has trouble responding. Any self love Pecola managed to save dies like the snow flakes on the pavement (TBE 76). Again "Pecola loses sight of herself" (Miner 186) and internalizes the pain, further destroying the little ability she has to respond, to question.14

Another example of the way their class and economic situation isolate Claudia and Frieda occurs when they, in search of Pecola, cross the class-divided neighborhood; they walk the distance recognizing the changes between the classes, the races. Even nature seems to bloom more fully on the rich side of town as (the steel-
mill pollution never reaches it) the 'Whites-only' Lake Shore Park blossoms with rosebuds. The beauty of the houses, gardens and the park create a distance. Nature seems to agree with the white values, whereas whites actually manipulate, manicure and try to control nature.

When Claudia and Frieda find Pecola at her mother's place of work, they surprise her and, ironically, for the first and last time in the novel, Pecola smiles (TBE 84). Moments later her mother physically and verbally abuses her. When Pecola accidently knocks the cobbler to the floor, burning her legs in the process, Pauline does more than "scold" Pecola (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 25); she physically assaults her, hits her twice. The incident damages Pecola, not only physically with bruises and burns, but emotionally because Pauline consoles the white girl rather than Pecola. Pauline's implication that Pecola's worth and that of the MacTeer girls' is less than that of the little yellow-haired girl, once again isolates the girls, further reinforcing the societal values. Although the MacTeer girls discover ways of redirecting adult pressure to accept the standard societal values, they cannot hide or deny Pauline's words. This abuse from Pauline, Pecola's supposed nurturer, devastates Pecola. Pauline's previous victimization explains some reasons behind her violence, but because of the choices she has made, she remains responsible for her actions. Pettis suggests that, "Pecola's victimization at the hands of her supposed nurturer is so overwhelming that readers may forget Pauline's previous victimization which is at the root of her behavior" (28). The devaluation of African Americans in North American society and the accepted version of beauty constrain both Pauline's
and Pecola's grow as children and as adults. Despite her history, Pauline must be held responsible for her actions, for the physical abuse and the pain she caused her daughter. But she is not solely responsible for Pecola's reaction, for her internalizing the pain.

Pecola's Father, her supposed protector, also abuses her when he physically violates her body. Even before Cholly approaches her she appears defeated, has a "tucked-in look" (TBE 128). He expands as Pecola contracts. When Pecola rubs her leg with her foot, it reminds Cholly of Pauline, not of her particularly (as Miner observes) but his reaction to her (179). He reacts to Pecola's gesture first in tenderness and love, then confusion, anger and defiance overwhelm him. Sargent reports, "the rape is...a violent rebellion against all laws and taboos" (232). Somerville points out that, "Rape has little to do with sex; it is an act of violence, which Pecola survives only marginally" (23). The rapes are not a "profound expression of love' as Otten insensitively states in his 1989 book (21). They are an invasion of Pecola's body, a breaking of boundaries. They are Cholly's violent response to his lack of control over his life, his inability to provide for Pecola. Although physical in act, sexual assault and rape result in violence to the soul, a violence which all but completely destroys Pecola. She no longer has the ability to question, or to wonder.

The dynamics of the sexual assault on Frieda differ from those of Pecola's case, as Frieda's father was not the perpetrator and although the intensity of the attack must not be down-played, Frieda was not raped. The girls' reactions to the abuse
differs as well. Although, like Pecola, Frieda is flung into shame and confusion, she survives Mr. Henry's sexual assault because her parents support and believe her. Pauline neither supports nor believes Pecola, so Pecola stops believing herself.

While Pecola survives the incestuous rapes, her search for blue eyes intensifies to the point she believes it can happen. After the rape, Pecola refocuses on the North American myth. Instead of confronting her father, a highly difficult and frightening task, she embraces the "safety" of blue eyes, believing that the color of her eyes can be changed. Since she cannot change or control what her father did, she attempts to create a change in reality. By describing Cholly's desire and attempt to reach out to Pecola, his loving and despising her and himself, Morrison encourages understanding of his choices, his actions, without lessening his responsibility for his actions. He too has had a hard life. Aunt Jimmie, the woman who raised him, often reminds him that she saved him after he was left on a junk heap. After she dies, he searches out his father, who rejects him and sets him wandering. Cholly's thoughts and his childhood history decrease our horror at his actions. The narrator of this scene describes the incidents and feelings preceding the incestuous rape, and speaks from inside Cholly's head, but not in his voice. Cholly can think and feel but cannot articulate his thoughts and feeling, except in action. Despite the pain of his childhood, he remains responsible for his actions (even though he does not acknowledge his responsibility).

But Pecola is not privy to this information, to his history, to his reasons. Even if she was it would not decrease the horror of the rape, merely be some sort of vague comfort, some sort of explanation. But she has no explanation. She tries to
explain what she remembers to Pauline, but Pauline doesn’t believe her. So Pecola survives by denying and in denying the rapes she denies her emotions, her experience, herself. She denies the horror of it all, the piece of her that broke.

Pecola, like most children in her situation, blames herself and isolates the rape from her reality. She cannot control what happens to her own body. Later, she develops a second self and when she talks to her, the second self reveals that Cholly raped her more than once. After the rapes no one can help her, and she can no longer help herself. Holloway weakly asserts, "tapping into this unconscious self can be a form of endurance," (45). Pecola survives by creating a second self and in doing so she can tolerate the insults and the incestuous rape. After the rape, Pecola can no longer be held responsible for creating herself, for struggling to change her life, yet she must still be held responsible for her actions.

Byerman claims that Pecola’s "rather pathetic obsession" with blue eyes is made horrifying when the rape scene unfurls ("Intense Behaviors" 447-457). Byerman’s pity implies Pecola did not have to accept the myth to survive, that she could have created herself, improved her situation; she had the ability to make a choice--up until the rape. Byerman’s assertion has some merit in that Pecola, despite all the pressures, must take some responsibility for her life. After the rape, though, her madness comes as no surprise nor does her inability to choose, to change.

Children who survive incest as Pecola has, often develop multiple personalities as Pecola does. And/or they completely block out the memory which may or may not come back to haunt them in their later years. Pecola denies the rapes, blocks them
out and seeks another answer, an easier path.

In the final act that flings Pecola into insanity, Soaphead Church, another subscriber to the standard version of beauty, gives Pecola the eyes she desperately wants. And in doing so "he rejects not only his own race, but whole of humanity whose bodies constantly reveal decay, disorder and morality" (McGann 61). Soaphead’s actions, although not as physically destructive as Cholly’s, as Dickerson asserts, still cause devastation (126). He, like Cholly, pities Pecola, and selfishly uses her for his own purpose: "to hang on to the feeling of power" (TBE 138). He "validates Pecola’s wish for blue eyes, affirming the correctness of her rejection of her race" (Demetrakopoulos 33).

After Soaphead validates her wish, Pecola’s ability to control her life vanishes. Her decision-making capacity has been inhibited throughout her life, but not completely destroyed until her visit to Soaphead. By the time she visits him, her pregnant belly bulges slightly (TBE 137). He offers her the connection to the love of the world, acceptance from all people, the caring of her family, the blue eyes. Miner writes, "although he sees Pecola more accurately than others do, he subordinates his vision of her to his vision of self-as-God" (188). With Soaphead’s encouragement Pecola, a sensitive, bewildered and withdrawn child, drops into the safety of insanity.

The neighbors’ gossip demonstrates that they do not understand Pecola’s situation. Like many ignorant people, they blame Pecola, the survivor, at least in part, for the rape and pregnancy. "The girl was always foolish," they claim (TBE 147). Pecola, they continue, carries "some of the blame" (TBE 147). They basically
accuse Pecola, a young teenager, of allowing the rape to happen. They dare to wonder if she fought back. When she loses her mind, they continue to gossip: "They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited" by it all, but no one showed concern for Pecola or her unborn child (TBE 147). They don't realize or admit that their responsibility for Pecola's tragic life; they encourage acceptance of the myth which prompts Pecola's and the entire Breedlove family's destruction.

Claudia and Frieda react more sensitively to Pecola's madness. They plant marigolds and bargain with God in the hope that the baby will live. The girls recognize the community's "overwhelming hatred of this unborn baby" (TBE 148). Claudia writes, "More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt the need for someone to want the black baby to live--just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals" (TBE 148). They desperately want the baby to be loved, not only to balance the love of little white girls, but also so they know they are loved. They recognize the connections between the neighbors' indifference to the unborn baby and the way the neighbors view them. This recognition characterizes their ability to see and understand; Pecola never reaches this point of consciousness, of experience, because she unconsciously retreats into madness.

Yet, even in her madness, solace eludes her, as her obsession with the bluest eye emerges. After she "receives" the eyes from Soaphead, she worries that they are not blue enough. Pecola (the 'I') needs her second self (the 'you') to comfort her, love her, reenforce her belief that she has eyes bluer than Mrs. Forrest's blouse, than
Joanna's or Michelena's eyes, bluer than the sky, than Alice-and-Jerry Storybook eyes—that she has the bluest eye (TBE 156). Miner observes, "tragically, even when combined, the 'I' and 'You' do not compose one whole being" (181). Pecola's new self also abuses her, asks questions about the rapes. Even she, the clever, knowing, loving part of Pecola who never really developed, who finally split off and became independent herself, doesn't understand. Referring to the rape she says, "Well, I'm glad you didn't let him" (TBE 154-5, my emphasis). The new self blames Pecola too, asks why she didn't tell Pauline. She knows about the terrifying events and she still tricks Pecola into talking about it. Although no longer in the same reality the neighbors live in, the second self accepts their gossip as truth. Even in madness, Pecola cannot live free of the myth.

No one even expresses compassion for Pecola or her unborn baby, except the girls and even their compassion is self-centered. Although they fought and prayed for the baby and for themselves too, after the miscarriage, they avoid her. They even avoid thinking about her; they feel shame and guilt because they didn't stop the baby from dying. Fearful for their own lives and unwilling to take more risks, they give up.

The adult Claudia includes herself in the black community who used Pecola as a scapegoat. She describes Pecola as the recipient of the waste of the world. Pecola walks in her backyard,

picking and plucking her way...among all the waste and beauty

of the world--which is what she herself was. All of our waste

51
which we dumped on her and she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. (TBE 159)

Claudia recognizes Pecola’s unconscious gift of her beauty, even though Pecola never appreciates or perhaps even perceives it. More importantly, Claudia also recognizes her own partial responsibility for Pecola’s tragic life, and that of the rest of the community.

The factors creating the barrier which prevents Pecola from valuing her beauty and produces the isolation she experiences, include being female, black, poor, young, abused and neglected. It also includes her conviction of her own "ugliness." All of these factors impede her attempts at growth, not because they are negative in themselves, but because Pecola’s community, and society in general, devalue them. However, as Hovet states, Morrison is "unwilling to blame black failure entirely on outside forces or upon the hazards of minority existence" (126). Claudia and Frieda experience some of the same forms of isolation as Pecola, but they do not suffer abuse in the hands of their parents. This distinction makes all the difference between Claudia the adult narrator, the story teller and Pecola, the insane child flitting around her backyard. Pecola has not had the support, the love, the acceptance that they have had.

But beside the differences in family support, Pecola herself has made choices which contributed to her situation. When Pecola appears in the novel, unlike Pauline, she has already accepted the myth. Ultimately, it must be assumed that at a
very young age, Pecola choose to accept the myth, accept others’ values which contribute to her stunted growth. The high number of external pressures she faced encouraged her to find the quickest and easiest survival method available, that of acceptance.

Samuel and Hudson-Weems argue that Pecola "is a ‘woman-child’ with freedoms and responsibilities" (15). They hold that "Pecola remains responsible, in the final analysis, for what happens to her." This assertion blames Pecola. Under closer examination, Pecola remains responsible for the choices she made, yet she cannot be held responsible for her mother’s physical abuse or her father’s violation of her body. She, not completely incapable of thought, is responsible for her reactions to the abuse. Her response to her parents’ and society’s abuse is crucial, as it determines the outcome of her life. Although she has no control over others’ action, she does maintain control of her mind (for a short time longer).

Contrary to Samuel and Hudson-Weems, Demetrakopoulos asserts, "Pecola, certainly, is expunged from human society even before she has awakened to a consciousness of self" (34). Demetrakopoulos implies Pecola did not have a choice. If she is not awakened to the consciousness of self, she cannot be held responsible for her situation. The distinction between her responsibility for her actions and her lack of responsibility for her situation, is confusing but important. The responsibility for the negative pressures Pecola feels, the ones that society throws on her, must be taken, as Claudia stated, by the community and all those who simply accept values instead of questioning and reassessing these values for themselves and their families.
Yet Pecola must be held responsible for her actions.

Not holding her responsible implies that she has no choice, no free will. Trying to make excuses for her (pitying her) destroys her (and the novel) as much as not understanding her struggle would. A balance must be sought between her and the community, the society’s responsibility for her situation. Compassion and an understanding (or at least recognition) of the difficulties Pecola and Pauline face, in the process of, or the attempt at creating herself are also an integral part of interpreting the novel.

Responsibility, and in turn, blame lies not just with the vague notion of society’s standards, but with individuals in her life. It also lies in Pecola’s choices, however few and inconsequential. Demetrakopoulos later states that no one is indicted for Pecola’s destruction, then adds "in another way we all are" (36). So, the responsibility for her tragic life falls on the myth, on her acceptance of the myth, on her choices, on her parents’ failure to create themselves, especially their failure to provide Pecola with support and a safe place to grow, and ultimately on the community.

Terry Otten also blames, in part, the black community for Pecola’s misery, writing that Pecola has been "ostracized from the American dream by virtue of her Blackness and from a Black community too much corrupted by the values of a white culture" (9). The black community is partly to blame, but the amount of blame placed on it, although minimal, should not be overlooked. The community’s responsibility to its members necessitates their acceptance of blame for their faults as
well as the admiration for the successes.

Before Pauline became Mrs. Breedlove, she had a chance to create herself but chose the path of acceptance. After she becomes Mrs. Breedlove and accepts the myth of beauty as truth, she forfeits her self-growth and lessens her chances at and her children’s chances of creating themselves. Pauline must also be held responsible for the people she hurts by not creating herself, particularly her children.

In an effort to conform, Pauline, Pecola, Maureen and Geraldine substitute "surface, societal norms for self-recognition" (Somerville 23). They accept the myth and although some characters receive more chances, more choices, all remain responsible for the choices they have made. Pauline and Pecola’s story contribute to a "much larger women’s myth, which tells of denial and disintegration, which unveils the oft-concealed connections between male reason, speech, pressure and female madness, silence and absence" (Miner 189). For example, Soaphead’s reasoning and his speech directly contribute to Pecola’s madness and silence. Although more successful in their survival than Pecola and Pauline, Frieda and Claudia accept many of the norms and their stories also depict the difficulties in growing up female (e.g., Mr. Henry’s sexual assault).

The path to self-love, self creation, is not the same for these characters. For some, self-creation becomes an incredible chore, a life threatening task, while for others choices present themselves and self-creation is not as much of a struggle. Those who skate, who have few obstacles to overcome, who were raised in a safe, happy, accepting environment, because their journey is easier, must take the next step
toward personalism: take responsibility for those who never saw choices, never had the chances they had. In the creation of themselves, they must be aware of others, understand that others were not given the choices, the chances they were. In telling the story, Claudia creates herself, detaches herself from herself, and is capable of "self-dispossession...[and] only those who are thus liberated can ever liberate others or the world" (Mounier 21).

Through the characters in The Bluest Eye, Morrison encourages questioning of society’s values, the myths. She encourages interpretations beyond Hovet’s viewing the novel as a "heartbreaking demonstration of the futility of defining self by another culture’s values," or Miner’s insistence that because of Claudia’s success in telling the story, the novel cannot be viewed as a tragedy (139). Both of these interpretations have merit, and by taking a closer look at the reasons for the characters’ acceptance of the myth, the isolation they experience, the forces opposing them, then we can better understand their world and the tragedy of their lives.

Through the novel, especially in her portrayal of Pauline Breedlove, Morrison outlines the difficulties black women face in their attempt to create themselves. Beside directly criticizing North American societal values and "question[ing] counterfeit white ideals, social standards" (Clark 55), Morrison criticizes characters who use "methods of coping which are safe and derivative (nesting) or which seek flight away from black identity and community" (Hovet 126). She shows how characters fail to create themselves because of societal pressures and their own choices, and in the process hurt others and themselves. In essence, The Bluest Eye explores the
"difficulty of achieving individuality and full humanity in an objectifying and manipulative society" (Byerman "Beyond Realism" 62).

The *Bluest Eye* is Morrison's only novel in which isolation, in its many forms, destroys one character (Pecola) and nearly destroys another (Pauline). In other characters' lives, isolation leads to a reluctance (perhaps because of fear) to create the self; the reluctance causes further isolation and lack of self-acceptance. Pauline's and Pecola's lives provide an example of the pain which results in not creating the self and exposes how the pain and isolation continues the cycle of avoiding self-creation. But characters like Frieda and Claudia have succeeded, have overcome their isolation; these strong female characters are the ones who reappear in Morrison's novels. Their struggle for understanding pulls them forward. Those who survived to tell the story, by Morrison's fifth novel, *Beloved*, become main characters and more fully partake in the struggle to create themselves and to an extent, live in a personalist manner.
Chapter 2

The Development of Self

and Personalism

in Toni Morrison’s Novel,

Beloved
The central idea in Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer prize winning novel, Beloved, originated from facts she found while researching The Black Book (1974). In an 1850 newspaper, Morrison discovered a photograph of Margaret Garner who attempted to kill her children rather than allow them to be reenslaved. Garner succeeded in killing only one, by slashing her throat. Morrison did not conduct much research on this particular story; she researched certain aspects of it and invented the rest of Margaret’s life (Samuel and Hudson-Weems 95).

In the novel Beloved, Morrison explores the unique desperation of a slave mother and asks us, the readers, "to enter the consciousness of a woman not just brutalized by the savagery of an evil institution but haunted by her own capacity for violence against the very object of her love" (Otten 82). The main character, Sethe, a strong and loving woman, searches for wholeness and meaning while enslaved as well as in freedom. Even as a teenage mother Sethe takes responsibility for herself and her children by escaping slavery. Treated like an object herself, Sethe loves her children, but sometimes treats them like possessions. When the slave catchers find her, she decides to kill her children and herself rather than hand her children over. She brought them into this world and feels it within her rights and responsibilities to decide their fate. Sethe considers the murder a mercy killing. She escapes most of the legal ramifications of her daughter’s murder, but remains in a different kind of slavery—one in her mind, where she does not allow herself to feel, to appreciate her own and her children’s lives. Because of the dead child who returns to haunt her and the fact Sethe is psychologically dead at this point, she avoids responsibility, fights
memory and finally becomes obsessed with trying to explain her actions to her ghost-daughter, Beloved.

"The worst atrocity of slavery, the real horror the novel exposes," Schapiro contends, "is not physical death but psychic death" (195). Many of the characters in Beloved suffer psychic death which "as the novel makes clear, involves the denial of one's being as a human subject" (Schapiro 195). The novel not only attests to some of the horrifying physical and psychological effects of slavery on Sethe and other slaves, but the psychological effects on their descendants as well. Similar to the way Pauline Breedlove passes on her blind acceptance of white society's values to her daughter, Sethe models psychic death as a means of survival and her daughter follows suit. White values and actions affect both mothers whether they accepted these values or not; white people treated both women like objects and/or animals. As non-human subjects (objects), the mothers find it difficult to accept responsibility for themselves and their children.

Yet many of the characters in Beloved, including Sethe, fight the white values and the white people who hold them back. They struggle to create themselves and occasionally, although not conscious of the philosophy, act in accordance with personalist values. As previously indicated, creating one's self includes heightening the awareness of self, and one's actions. One must also acquire knowledge about one's own and others' experience. The philosophy of personalism is tied in with, but takes one step beyond that of creating one's self. To review (and to simplify), personalism entails not only accepting responsibility for creating one's self, for the
growth and the actions of the self, but also the acceptance of responsibility for, and
the willingness to fight against, the evils of the world. In order to live according to
personalist values, one must take personal responsibility for one’s children and elders,
especially those not physically or mentally capable of caring for themselves. In using
the creation of self and personalism as a lens in which to examine characters, we
uncover characters’ secrets, fears and hidden strengths.

The main female characters in the novel, Baby Suggs, Denver and Sethe,
periodically take responsibility for themselves, and without recognizing or naming the
philosophy, embrace personalism by taking responsibility for their ancestors and
relatives and occasionally for the evils of the world; they also repeatedly deny and/or
avoid all responsibility, even that of caring for their own physical needs. The
women, who represent three generations, survive the horrors of slavery, its
psychological and physical effects, and a period of psychic death. Although slavery,
both directly and indirectly, contributes to the reasons Baby Suggs and Sethe shun
responsibility, both women make choices and remain responsible for them.

Baby Suggs quits, deciding whitefolks have too much power; Sethe murders
her child, then fights emotion and memory for eighteen years. Although as a child
Denver begins to create herself the year she attends school, most of her life she does
not—until she leaves 124 Bluestone Road. In leaving her home she creates herself:
she ventures into the outside world thereby heightens her awareness of herself and
others. The complex character Beloved, who represents a variety of people and
ideas, emerges first as an unseen but active presence, then as a human. The way we
view her ability to create herself and act in a personalist manner depends, at least in part, on our interpretation of who she is and who she represents. When we examine the physical and emotional battering the main characters endure and the choices they make, we sympathize with the characters. We also gain a more complete understanding of the effects of slavery on slaves and their descendants.

Although victims, the characters in *Beloved* have a stronger sense of themselves, exhibit stronger personalities and more reasoning ability than the characters in *The Bluest Eye*. The road is not easy for any of the characters in either novel, but some characters fight back, try to discover new roads, create new values which respect and value their personhood. Even though the outside world of the novel shows nothing but contempt for characters, they struggle to find alternatives, an activity which personalism holds in high esteem. In their struggle, and sometimes because of it, characters still attempt to love themselves and others.

Outside factors, like all the life destroying aspects of slavery and characters’ willingness to take risks, determine characters’ ability to take responsibility. Sethe risks her own and her children’s lives in her escape; her escape is an act of self-creation as well as an unconscious embrace of personalism. Like Sethe, none of the characters are aware of the philosophy of personalism, but many strive for it without naming their philosophy. When Halle buys freedom for Baby Suggs, his mother and a slave for sixty years, she awakens and creates herself, encouraging others to love themselves and in this way she embraces personalism. On the verge of starvation and after months of caring for Beloved, Denver develops herself by facing her fears and
leaving her yard in search of outside help. Later in the novel, she also demonstrates personalist values by caring for her mother and by her constant awareness of the thing inside her mother that kills. Beloved, in both the spirit and the physical form, remains oblivious to everything but her own needs and wants; she never even reaches an awareness of herself.

After Halle buys her freedom, Baby Suggs takes responsibility for herself, her growth, and reveals personalist values by helping others take responsibility for themselves. However, during her sixty years in slavery, Baby has little control, takes little responsibility. She is sold, separated from her parents, forced to work in the fields, and often beaten and abused. Slave owners sell her children’s fathers and do not allow her to experience any long-term relationship with them. She can not even provide a space for her children to grow because they too are stolen from her and sold, one after the other, even before they have their adult teeth. Nor can she discover herself, or create herself:

Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. (Morrison Beloved 140, hereafter cited)

As a slave, she has never had the chance to create herself, to have a decent relationship with her children, or with her children’s fathers. Slave owners hid the
map to these discoveries and experiences.

Baby’s life changes when Mr. Garner buys her. She notices the differences between Sweet Home and other plantations, between the Garners and other slave owners. The Garner’s type of slavery implies that, "a self wants the recognition of another self; this form of mutuality is more desirable...than mastery of an object" (Schapiro 196). Mr. Garner feels better about himself because Baby Suggs and other slaves who live on the Sweet Home plantation recognize the difference in treatment; they are not always treated like objects. Garner doesn’t stud his young male slaves; he simply ignores their sexuality. He listens to them but does not allow them to leave the farm without him. Baby Suggs notices how Mrs. Garner hums when she works and lights up when Mr. Garner comes home. And, most importantly, Baby Suggs observes that at Sweet Home "nobody knocks her down" (140). Yet, she also recognizes: "It’s better here but I’m not" (140). Something is still missing. Neither she nor any of the other slaves have the freedom to create or to develop themselves; they still can not leave the ranch. In effect they remain objects, as Garner still owns them, although he treats them with some respect and trust. He considers himself a kind, responsible man because he calls his slaves men and he allows Baby to keep her son Halle. He proudly fights with neighbors over his "kind" treatment of slaves. His compassion for his slaves makes him appear as if he has personalist values, but he does not. The Garners’ type of slavery lightens the chains of slavery, but the chains still confine.

Halle works to buy her freedom, but she can’t imagine what use she has for it
at her age. However, after Mr. Garner and Baby cross the river, she discovers, then
rejoices in herself, her body (141) and her hunger (144), which is greater than it has
ever been. She also recognizes Mr. Garner’s pleasure with himself because he
allowed Halle to buy Baby’s freedom. But Baby thinks, "You got my boy and I'm all
broke down" (146). Finally free, with a disjointed hip and sixty years of slavery
behind her, her joy does not override the reality of her situation.

Despite living most of her life in slavery, with little to no room for growth or
self-discovery, once free, Baby blossoms. Slavery broke everything in her, used up
everything but her heart (87). And with her big heart, in the most obvious, albeit
unconscious, embrace of personalism in the novel, she preaches, telling everyone to
love themselves, to create themselves:

in this place here, we flesh; flesh that weeps,
laughs; flesh that dances on barefeet in the grass.
Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love
your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your
eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more
do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they
flay it....This is flesh I’m talking about here.
Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to
rest and to dance; backs that need support;
shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling
you. And O my people, out yonder, hear me,
they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight.

So love your neck....More than your life-holding
womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me
now, love your heart. For this is your prize. (88-89)

Despite often being the object of whitefolks’ hate and insecurities, Baby teaches
people, former slaves and free women, men and children, to love themselves, to
create themselves and their families. Because, she tells them, if they don’t, no one
else will. And "with Baby Suggs’ heart in charge, the people let go" (94). They let
go of anger, fear, sadness, self-hatred and joy. They start to love themselves and in
loving begin to create themselves.

But the impromptu party and feast, created by Baby Suggs’ generosity, offends
the neighbors. Such a display of excess isolates them and they feel superfluous.
They don’t understand how an ex-slave and her daughter-in-law can give so much,
without their help. After the party, Baby smells destain in the air and sees something
dark coming, but can not distinguish who or what approaches the house. Despite her
unique ability, or supernatural power, to understand and to perceive things, she can
not protect her family without the community’s assistance. Despite being a personalist
by virtue of the fact that her values echo those of personalism, Baby cannot protect
her family from Schoolteacher and the consequences of the Fugitive Slave Act. None
of Baby Suggs’ natural or supernatural abilities: her self-love, the creation and
development of herself, her ability and attempt to help others heal, love, create and
accept her philosophy, her values and in essence personalism, can stop the whitemen. She has done everything she can and still they walk into her yard and indirectly destroy her life. Had the neighbors not been offended by the party, a child would have been sent to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe that whitemen were looking for Sethe. But the neighbors do nothing; they do not embrace personalism and the whitemen approach unannounced. Without the warning, Baby only senses danger; she can not place it. Sethe sees the men approach and reacts by attempting to murder her children. She only has time to murder one before Stamp Paid stops her. After the murder, Baby decides that she could not have prevented it, and that the evil power of whitefolks is stronger than her heart, stronger than the power of love.

In Baby Suggs’ mind, Sethe’s murder of her child proves the futility of Baby Suggs’ teaching. The bloodspill in the backyard mocks and rebukes her message of love (177). After the murder, Baby Suggs can not condemn Sethe’s rough choice or approve it: "One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last" (180).

In the midst of not being able to support or admonish Sethe’s actions, she quits. She decides that she can not fight whitefolks. Despite her values, her embrace of personalism by encouraging others to care for themselves, she decides that nothing can protect her and her family from whitefolks; so, she reasons, why fight? Yet Baby does not see herself without responsibility, or without guilt. As Denver notes, the ghost also directs her anger at Baby, for not understanding the danger, "for not doing anything to stop it" (209).
Baby Suggs' friend, Stamp Paid, begs her to continue fighting, to proclaim the Word again, adding that Sethe's the murderer. Baby Suggs replies, "And if she hadn't?" (179). Stamp tries to convince her: "You paid it; now life owes you" (185). He feeds her her own message, insisting that she love and create herself, take responsibility for herself and help others claim themselves too. He recognizes her power, her values, in essence her previous embrace of personalism. His values, not unlike hers, make him a personalist too as he tries to create himself and helps slaves cross the Ohio River.

Although Baby Suggs preached the message before, because of the murder, the whitemen in her yard, "her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived" (89). By quitting, Baby Suggs falls away from personalism, becomes psychologically dead and awaits physical death. She retreats to her bedroom to think about colors. She isolates herself. She quits because she believes she "proved herself a liar, [so she] dismiss[es] her great heart and lay in the keeping room bed" (89). After sixty years of slavery and ten years free, she has come to the conclusion: "That there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople" (104).

When she realizes that whitefolks have too much power, Baby Suggs decides fighting is futile. Yet after she dies, her spirit (her voice) still crosses over into the land of the living and encourages Denver to step off the porch, to seek food; Baby Suggs' spirit acknowledges that there is no defense, tells Denver to know it and persist anyway. Baby's spirit advocates for challenging injustice, despite the gross
differences of power, the frightening risks, and in this way returns to a personalist philosophy.

Since Beloved represents a variety of people and ideas, her values both reflect and deject those described in personalism. As both a supernatural and natural being, she also creates and un-creates herself and provides a prominent example of magical realism. The conflicting message she sends shows the complexity of her character. Her ability to create herself and act in a personalist manner depends, at least in part, on the interpretation of who she is and who she represents. Whether or not and the degree to which Beloved's values reflect those described in personalism, depends on one's interpretation of who she is and who (or what) she represents. The most obvious interpretation of Beloved's identity, that she represents Sethe's murdered baby, dismisses the complexity of the character. Beloved represents a variety of people and ideas: Sethe's mother, other slaves, particularly the "60 million more" who died in captivity in Africa or on the slave ships, (Morrison refers to them in her headnote), and the incarnated memory of Sethe's guilt. Elizabeth House's essay, "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved who is not Beloved," offers support for Ella and Sethe's first guess, that Beloved is actually the woman who was locked in the house of a whiteman and who Sethe and Denver later mistake for the murdered child. Beloved represents an example of magical realism and a combination of flesh and spirit: the spirit of Sethe's murdered baby, the symbol who represents other slaves and a physical woman. Morrison uses magical realism, in this case a character with
supernatural powers and yet still grounded in actual events, to convey that which we cannot understand in any other terms. Beloved is beyond our reality, beyond anything we can physically hold on to. She represents the past (events) and the present (often memories of the past). At different points in the novel, all three exceedingly wounded "spirits," merge with each other and with Sethe, which inhibits Sethe and Beloved's ability to create themselves and maintain values which reflect a personalist philosophy.

In the place Beloved existed before 124, she felt isolated, confused and disjointed: "there is no place where I stop" (210). She has no ending or beginning. She sees Sethe's face as her own. In her inability to see herself as an individual, creating herself becomes virtually impossible and an embrace of personalism inconceivable.

Yet, in this example, Beloved also represents Sethe's mother and other slaves. In Beloved's soliloquy, the spirit of the slaves are apparent (210-19). She talks about crouching, referring to the overcrowded slave ships and about "the little hill of dead people" who the men without skin push through portholes in the ship (211). As the figure representing the spirit of the slaves, she revisits the past, claims herself; her values reflect a personalist philosophy because she represents other slaves and tells the story. In telling healing can begin. So, in an indirect manner, Beloved, the symbol, takes responsibility for the evils of the world by not allowing people to forget the horrors of the past. In this way she is a personalist.

At first Beloved, the angry baby spirit, haunts 124. She is the house. Denver
approaches her (the house) as she would an idle, proud but dependent relative (29). After Denver hears her climbing up the stairs, Beloved’s presence in the house changes from a gentle sighing and accidents to "pointed and deliberate abuse" (104). After the baby spirit’s actions change from innocent harassment to deliberate abuse, the spirit rejects the values personalism holds and in effect becomes part of the evil personalism fights against. After Paul D chases the baby spirit out of the house, it returns in the physical form.

Even in the physical appearance as a young woman, everything about her suggests newness. She has physical baby-like qualities: unlined feet and hands, unwrinkled, shiny skin; even her "breath was exactly like new milk" (98); and her "touch was exactly like the baby ghost’s" touch (99). She also acts like an infant, from her incontinence to her interactions with Denver and Sethe. She has temper tantrums, (242) and scratches her throat until it bleeds simply to upset Sethe. Beloved strangles Sethe in the clearing, then repeatedly kisses her neck—as if trying to nurse; Sethe responds, "You too old for that" (98). She fights against creating herself, against personalist values and encourages others to do so too. She not only refuses to create herself, but she abuses other people.

Beyond these infantile qualities, Beloved, when she appears in the physical form, also has other seemingly supernatural characteristics. Her gravelly voice lies just outside music, "with a cadence not like theirs" (60). She is able to force Paul D out of the house, then seduce him while the rust flakes away, opening his tobacco tin heart. She disappears in the coolhouse, frightening Denver. Despite her supernatural
abilities, Beloved does nothing to help anyone. She only focuses on herself and her needs.

Her obsessive relationship with Sethe is selfish and detrimental. The physical Beloved also becomes the manifestation of Sethe’s guilt. Beloved originally encourages and allows Sethe to go back into the past and take responsibility for her actions, then continually accuses and berates Sethe for abandoning her (241). Beloved thinks her isolation, her abandonment in the hands of Sethe, is worse than anything anyone else has experienced. Sethe tries to explain her experience, her feelings, but Beloved will not listen (241-42). As a person with no identity, Beloved imitates Sethe, copies her body movements, tilts her head the way Sethe does, wears her clothes, tries to become and possess Sethe (241). Finally, the unforgiving, abusive, confused woman-child demands Sethe’s constant attention and even that is not enough. In her intense jealousy and obsession, Beloved temporarily destroys Sethe and Paul D’s relationship: "she hated [him] so" (119).

Unwilling to see Sethe or Denver’s pain, Beloved experiences the greatest isolation; she never connects with anyone. She fears flying apart, but Sethe and Denver keep her together. The first hint that she may fly apart occurs when she loses her tooth (133). She becomes:

- a demonic force returned to punish and to redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to ‘free’ Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price; she is on one hand
'an evil thing' on the other a Christ figure come
to save. (Otten 84)

On the whole, the parts of the fragmented Beloved overlap and often
distinction becomes difficult. Beloved, the physical woman, dances with Denver,
speaks of the isolation of the other world: the darkness, the heat, many people—only
some dead. The dead refer to the piles of slaves' bodies on the ships. Beloved
appears as a physical woman, as Sethe's dead baby and as a representation of the
slaves who died on the ships.

After the women sing outside 124 and Sethe tries to attack the whiteman,
Beloved disappears. The neighbors differ about how she left. A child claims to have
seen a women with "fish for hair" running through the woods (267). Beloved returns
to the water, to the sea. Here she represents evil which the neighbors chased away.
They return to personalist values by exorcising Sethe.

After Beloved disappears, with Paul D's help, Sethe may heal, may pull out of
her depression and continue living. Despite Beloved's attempts to fight against
personalist values, her return to Sethe's world helps Sethe. Without it and the
sequence of events that followed, Sethe would still be living among the
psychologically dead.

But Beloved, Rushdy claims,
represents only half of Morrison's work: the accusing glare, the
unforgiving perspective, the need to forget--'It was not a story
to pass on.' There is another daughter in the novel, another
daughter of history—representing the embracing glance, the
loving view, the need to remember. (578)

Although Beloved represents the need to forget, she also represents the need to
remember. She personifies the pain of the memory, the difficulty in processing grief.
Denver, Sethe’s other daughter, also represents the need to remember, to revisit the
past.

Denver, unlike Baby Suggs, is not born in captivity, yet she still suffers
because of slavery. In murdering her daughter Beloved, Sethe saved Denver from
enslavement; however it also profoundly affected her psychological makeup
(particularly, by leaving her unnaturally afraid of people, including her mother).

Blessed from the beginning, from the unusual circumstances of her birth, and
graced with an ability to see, and communicate with spirits from the other side,
Denver leads a "charmed" life (209). Despite her supernatural powers and the caring
she receives, Denver finds it hard to create herself as a child; but by her late teens,
on the verge of starvation and with the encouragement of Baby’s spirit, she steps out
of her sheltered, confused world and begins the journey to create herself. The
psychological effects slavery has had on her mother, and in turn on Denver, help
prevent her from discovering herself sooner.

Beside Denver’s natural gifts, like love and sensitivity, she acquires unusual
abilities due, in part, to the psychological effects of slavery and her mother’s
reactions to it. These abilities include: sensing future happenings, like knowing that
after her dog Here Boy wanders off (51), he will not return (55); reversing adverse situations, like teaching herself to take pride in the disgust and condemnation the neighbors heap on her (37); saving her mother, her sister and herself from starvation; and finally her supernatural ability to mediate between the living and the spirits, as she plays with the baby spirit by the stream, sees a dress praying beside her mother and hears Baby Suggs speak from the other side. Her abilities allow her to survive but set her apart from other children. She faces many difficulties in creating herself, different from those of most children.

Her abilities only carry her only so far. She survives several adverse situations with the assistance of friends and strangers. In her awkward, ignorant yet compassionate way, Amy, the whitegirl who happens upon Sethe as she is about to give birth, literally pulls Denver into the world. Stamp Paid catches Denver mid-swing before Sethe, in her impassioned desire to save Denver from slavery, smashes her head against the wall. Sethe protects her and provides her with food and shelter. Her brothers teach her games. Baby Suggs tells her stories, encourages her to listen to her "body and love it" (209). Even after Baby Suggs dies and her brothers run away, Denver and the baby ghost play down by the stream. Fear prevents Denver from leaving 124, so for most of her life the ghost and Sethe are her only companions. Shortly after Paul Dabanishes the baby ghost, Beloved, the sister whose blood Denver drank with her mother's milk, appears in the flesh and Denver feels comforted.

But the caring Denver receives does not sustain her, as she spends the majority
of her time alone, often in her emerald forest. And growth does not occur in loneliness. Mounier in his description of the struggle between passivity (stagnancy) and the movement toward personalism, asserts that nourishment cannot be gained from "auto-digestion" (7). In other words one can not digest oneself and grow from it; one needs others to survive. Schapiro echoes this idea with relation to Pecola: "the crucial lesson...cannot be learned in isolation; self-love needs a relational foundation and a social content" (207). Denver's foundation is based on her grandmother who gives up on life and her mother whom she fears. Her loneliness, exceeded only by her fear, thrives.

She fears everything outside 124, especially "whitemen." Within the house, her fear is manageable. She enjoys the ghost's company but is afraid of her mother and is aware the thing that made her kill may return. Denver increases her awareness as she practices caution and vigilance, waiting and trying to protect others from the "thing." Her values reflect those found in personalism. Her relationship with her mother creates an awareness of others outside herself and encourages growth. She moves toward personalism as she takes personal responsibility for protecting others from the "thing."

Despite her intense fears, at seven years of age, she wanders over to Lady Jones' house and peaks in the window four times before Lady Jones catches her and invites her in. Denver finally ventures beyond 124 and finds the house she saw other children approaching. In this way she takes responsibility for the creation of herself for the first time. For a year she enjoys the company of other children, learns and
creates herself. In her hunger for knowledge, she doesn't notice other children avoiding her, until Nelson Lord asks her about the murder. Then he asks if she stayed in prison with her mother. Denver asks Sethe but is unable to hear Sethe's answer to those questions, particularly the second question. Denver becomes "deaf rather than hear the answer" (105). Indirectly, slavery causes her to drop out of school and avoid any kind of social interaction. Sethe's action (the murder), however, more directly throws Denver into the world of the psychologically dead. In the midst of withdrawing from everything, she watches for the baby ghost (105).

Appropriately, Denver, after hearing nothing for two years, hears the baby-ghost climbing up the stairs. "By recognizing the ghost's identity," as Rushdy points out, "Denver begins the process of confronting the ramifications of the past" (581). She embraces the baby spirit who lives, teases, torments and frightens the inhabitance of 124. Her love, as well as her desire to protect the baby ghost, continues to grow. When Beloved appears in human form, Denver, in her loneliness and isolation, shakes but wants more (53).

Denver survives her loneliness and isolation by imagining. She hides in the boxwood bushes, first using it as a playhouse in her youth, then as a refuge from her brother's fright, and finally it becomes a place:

closed off from the hurt and the hurt world, where Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because her loneliness wore her out. **Wore her out.** (29)
The hide-out, a place of perfume and emerald light, offers safety from the outer world, a place where Denver does not feel responsible for her pain or the pain around her. She survives by living in non-reality and innocence. Growth and change require too much risk. She remembers little of the tragedy of her sister's death and does not seek answers. She only asks Sethe to tell and retell the story of her own birth. Through that story, Denver gains a vague awareness of self, but cannot bear to listen to Sethe tell stories that do not include her.

With the arrival of Paul D, Sethe tells other stories and Denver feels threatened. In her insecurity and anger, she attacks him verbally. By reminiscing about Sweet Home, he takes Sethe's attention away from Denver. Denver confronts Sethe and Paul D's romantic illusion of Sweet Home, making them admit to reality. She confronts them, not because she wants to help Sethe and Paul D grow, but because she wants Sethe's attention; Denver uses retaliation as a survival method. Denver cries for the first time in nine years, "wetting her far too womanly breasts" (14). Although physically a woman, Denver has not yet matured emotionally. Her fear of the outside, of other people, especially of white people, and the answers to Nelson Lord's question has kept her from venturing very far. Her fear has kept her friendless and lonely.

Her fear and her loneliness also leave her more vulnerable to the physical appearance of Beloved, to her demands and her whims. Not only desperate for a friend, Denver also yearns for her sister to help her wait for their father (208). After waiting years for Beloved to appear, Denver believes she must protect and nurture
Beloved. Through her undivided attention, Denver receives simple rewards, like a smile from Beloved. Because Denver's awareness of self is minimal, she loses herself in Beloved. Through Beloved she thinks she finds meaning and wholeness. She thinks she creates herself.

Denver feeds Beloved food and stories and by doing so, Denver feeds herself. As she tells the story of her birth, she adds details, adds flesh and blood to the bones of what she has heard. Denver's "monologue became, in fact, a duet as they lay down together, Denver nursing Beloved's interest like a lover whose pleasure was to overfeed the loved" (78). Their relationship becomes almost incestuous, and definitely obsessive. But Beloved fills Denver's immediate needs, at least temporarily. Denver will do anything to keep Beloved entertained and nothing to make her uncomfortable. She keeps Beloved's secrets: from her trips to the cold house to "the tip of the thing she saw when Beloved lay down" (120). Denver recognizes that Beloved should not know about Sethe's earrings, (63), but she doesn't tell Sethe and Sethe doesn't realize Beloved should not know—until later. Denver even lies to Sethe and Paul D to protect Beloved. Paul D and Denver see Beloved pick up a rocking chair single handed, but Denver denies it (56). In her obsession, Denver no longer retreats to the emerald hiding place, because she has made a connection, a friend, and her determination not to lose her solidifies. As obsessed with Beloved as Beloved becomes with Sethe, Denver forgets her own growth, her own needs; she suffers psychic death.

By the time Beloved disappears in the shed, Denver cries, because "she has no
When Beloved abandons Denver, this action throws Denver into the greatest loneliness she has ever experienced. She reaches her limit; first her brothers leave, Baby dies, then Sethe pays attention to Paul D not her and now Beloved disappears. Denver can not stand the aloneness, the isolation. Denver thought she possessed Beloved: "She's mine, Beloved. She's mine" (209). Loving so hard and being alone so much, her love turns into ownership, which takes the place of her desire to create herself. She becomes depersonalized.

Even after Sethe and Beloved cut Denver out of their games, ignore her, after their relationship remains the same in her presence and in her absence, Denver still watches and waits for the thing inside Sethe that kills. She is "alert for any sign Beloved was in danger" (240). Later Sethe will try to own Beloved, but Beloved eventually owns Sethe. Denver eventually recognizes the role reversal and decides she must protect Sethe from Beloved. Pushed out of the relationships with her mother and sister, Denver flourishes, accepts values akin to those of personalism.

Finally on the edge of starvation, Denver takes a step. Sethe can no longer care for her or her daughters' physical needs, so Denver must venture out to find food. The only one of the three who realizes they need help in order to survive, Denver takes, "the step off the edge of the world" (243). In leaving 124, she faces her fear of white people and of people in general. She assumes the responsibility for having nurtured resentment, "for having kept the past alive for selfish reasons" (Rushdy 581). Baby Suggs' voice encourages her, telling her that nothing will protect her and that she has no defense (244), no way to protect herself against the whiteman,
but that she must take the risk. Knowing is not a defense, but a way toward integrity and self-development. She succeeds in gathering food from the neighbors. Each day she journeys out she becomes more responsible, slowly overcoming her fear of people and regaining awareness, in this way moving toward personalism.

At this point, Denver not only cares for Sethe and Beloved's physical needs, but she thinks she understands the connection between the two: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (251). Their obsession with each other allows Denver to notice, to step back and to assess the situation herself. She becomes morally alive when she begins to comprehend the enormity of Sethe's love and to experience shame for her mother's suffering (Otten 92). She also serves as the filtering ear for Sethe's process of self-discovery. She must hear and tell the neighbors the story in order to save her mother. In order to create herself, she must also remember, by revising her memory, her own and her mother's history (Rushdy 579).

Nelson Lord's words force her to take another step back. This time she steps away from herself and observers that she has a self. When she sees him at Lady Jones' house, he tells her to take care of herself. His words create a new thought, that of "having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). Denver separates herself from Beloved and Sethe, realizing that she has a self of her own to care for, and in doing so takes another step toward self-creation, away from objectification and attempting to possess others. Once she recognizes herself as a separate and worthy person, self-creation and the acceptance of personalist values follow.
After many years of watching and waiting for the reappearance of the "thing" in Sethe that kills, Denver finally sees it when the neighbor women sing and Mr. Bodwin approaches. She quickly responds: "She was the first to wrestle her mother down. Before anybody knew what the devil was going on" (266). She took it upon herself to protect everyone from the thing inside Sethe and in doing so she also protects Sethe from the thing. Finally, without recognizing it as such, Denver embraces personalism by assuming responsibility and reuniting "others in the struggle to restore wholeness to a fallen community" (Otten 92). The community reunites when the neighbors come to 124 and sing.

In the end, the quiet lonely Denver-girl becomes a woman with her own thoughts and opinions (267). She warns Paul D, "Careful how you talk to my ma’am, hear?" (267). Then she walks away with a young man. No longer afraid of people, she talks to Paul D in a mature, protective manner. Denver takes responsibility for the care of her mother after Beloved disappears and Sethe retreats to bed. Despite the craziness of her childhood, and her mother, the loneliness and fear, Denver, at nineteen, rejoins the world, and discovers herself. She has overcome some of the psychological effects of slavery, and begun the process of creating herself. When she accepts values like those of personalism, she survives and even finds contentment. Accepting these values also encourages her to continue to love herself and others.

Sethe is not quite charmed like Denver, but she too survives. Sethe’s
development begins even before her birth. The only baby her mother did not throw away, the one child conceived in love as her mom wrapped her arms around a black man, Sethe learns that her siblings were conceived in violence and rape. Sethe’s mother bore them, then threw them away. Despite her mother allowing her to survive, Sethe and her mother could not interact much because her mother, forced to work long hours, returned from the fields too tired to hold or talk to Sethe. After her birth, her mother was only allowed to nurse her for two weeks. Sethe remembers her mother only by the cloth hat she wore and the circle and cross on her mother’s chest (31). Sethe’s “family” consists of the image of her mother and Nan, the one-armed woman who cares for all the children. Nan tells the children stories of the boats crossing the sea and teaches them words in their native language. But Sethe longs for her natural mother.

Later Sethe realizes that her mother may have tried to escape without her which would explain why her mother was hung. But acknowledging her mother’s abandonment and betrayal is too horrifying to Sethe. She reacts to this possibility by denying it, saying, a mother wouldn’t abandon her daughter, would she? In her attempt to escape, Sethe’s mother tries to better herself but Sethe cannot see this; she only sees that her mother abandons any responsibility for her daughter. Sethe’s fear of abandonment resurfaces later.

Thirteen and iron-eyed, Sethe is brought to Sweet Home and lives there a year before she chooses her husband. She takes her time making the decision, weighing
the choices, before she finally chooses Halle. Determined to have a wedding dress, she takes pieces of material from around the house and sews herself one. She demands respect, and since no one will provide a wedding for her, she creates one herself; she makes a dress from stolen pieces of clothing. A strong and determined woman at fourteen, Sethe strives to create herself, to create a good life in the midst of not being allowed to own herself. Despite the hardships, she strives for what she wants, showing her willingness to change her life as much as she is able. Already she begins to create herself, when she recognizes no one will give her what she wants.

Years later, Sethe’s owner, Mr. Garner, dies and Schoolteacher takes over. When Sethe realizes that Schoolteacher considers her part animal and that he views her children as property, she decides to run away despite the fact she will be running with three small children: "Before then it was the only thing she ever did on her own. Decided" (162). She makes a decision, which, although extremely risky, she hopes will improve her lot and that of her children, thereby developing herself and providing a space for her children to discover themselves. Before she escapes, the boys hold her down and steal her milk,25 which makes her feel dirty and which scars her emotionally. Yet she attempts to rebel against their action by telling Mrs. Garner. Mrs. Garner cries and talks to Schoolteacher, which only results in Sethe being beaten.

Schoolteacher’s actions further verify her suspicion that Sweet Home is no longer a safe and happy place where slaves have some dignity and pride. Even during
the whipping she receives for telling Mrs. Garner, she doesn’t make a sound. Again, she rebels by not screaming like Schoolteacher expects. But in the process she bites off a piece of her tongue: "Clamped down on it, it come right off. I thought Good God, I’m going to eat myself up" (202). Schoolteacher tries to break her spirit, scars her physically and causes her to start to destroy herself. He "punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight" (9). As Schapiro points out, "Her eyes reflect the psychic loss and denial of self she has experienced on all levels in her life" (200). Overwhelmed by the violence she has seen, heard, and survived, (for a short time) Sethe ceases to grow, to question, to fight.

Despite her bloody back and fouled plans, Sethe sends her children ahead and later tries to tell Paul D "what it’s like to send your children off when your breasts are full" (16). She knows something has gone wrong with the plans, but sends her children on ahead anyway—for their freedom, despite the pain and risk of permanent separation. While trying to find Halle, she finds Paul D wearing an iron ring around his neck and learns of the others’ fate. She blocks out much of the horror and begins to run, with an open back, with the baby—the antelope—kicking in her belly and soon with raw, bleeding feet, she runs.

After she miraculously escapes slavery, birthing Denver en route, she meets her freed children on the other side where she rejoices and claims herself:

"Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing herself is one thing--claiming ownership of that freed self

85
Claiming ownership entails acknowledging her own existence and accepting responsibility for development of herself. Not only does she free and claim herself and her children, but she continues to create herself and provide a space where her children can create and develop themselves.

After her blessed and successful crossing, and a month of freedom, Sethe's luck runs out. Her life turns to chaos twenty-eight days after her arrival at Baby Suggs' house. She challenged much of what slavery and people have thrown on her, and when everything else fails, when the slave catchers attempt to recapture her and her children, she seizes control the only way she knows how; she attempts to murder her children. In her mind she chooses the lesser of two evils; she chooses death rather than slavery.

Years later Sethe explains her reasons for her choice to Paul D, "I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. I did that" (162). Her actions both embrace personalism and create evil. She embraces personalist values by taking responsibility for herself, her children and for avoiding the evil (abuse) she knew was waiting for them. She continues, "It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right..." (162). She takes control and rises to meet the challenges forced upon her. She took great risks and made her children take risks, escaped slavery, and brought her children to freedom. After all she has survived and endured, she understandably refuses to let all that go "back where it was, and I couldn't let her nor any of em live under Schoolteacher. That was out"
Sethe is determined her daughters will not be sexually abused by Schoolteacher, nor will he physically abuse her boys. She wants to take them "to the other side" (203), to her mother, "outside this place, where they would be safe" (163). Her friend Stamp Paid interrupts her before she can kill all of them and herself. Although it seems to Sethe as the only thing to do, Morrison "grants her no reprieve from judgement" (Otten "Beloved" 83).

To understand this judgment, we must begin with the premise that the murder is evil, part of the world evil Sethe attempts to fight against. She interprets her responsibility as not to allow them to go back to slavery--even at the cost of their lives. Obviously too young, the children can not make this choice, so she decides for them. She did not have many options. Yet it is not the choice itself, but the fact she made an almost automatic, yet conscious choice, that shows her taking responsibility for herself and her children. That taking of responsibility would fit into personalist values, however, the action itself, the murder completely distorts the idea of taking responsibility. On the one hand the murder was the right thing to do because Sethe saved her child from slavery, but on the other hand, as Morrison remarked on the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour, "She had no right to do it" (Otten 83).

Sethe defends herself and her actions: "It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165). She has lived through the terrible emotional and physical abuse, and refuses to allow anyone but herself to abuse her children. She knows that slavery dirties one to the core of one's being.
Sethe’s biggest fear, and the thing that makes it possible for her to kill and worse than any physical abuse, is the power whitepeople have:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or main you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. (251)

Whitepeople scarred Sethe’s spirit, her image of herself. But they have not yet dirtied her children, and she will not allow that to happen. She reasons, they are her best thing: "Whites might dirty her alright, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing--the part of her that was clean" (251). Sethe decides that death is better than being dirtied. So she attempts to kill them. After murdering Beloved, Sethe joins the psychologically dead. She explains later, "After the shed, [where she killed her daughter] I stopped" (201). She can not continue fighting, nor can she continue creating herself. By loving something outside herself so much, by placing all of the value of her life in something outside herself, Morrison said, Sethe loses herself and her identity (Stepto 584). Her priorities eventually lead to her destruction.

She desperately wants to show her love for her dead daughter and for her other children but the daughter can’t hear and the other children fear her. The murder traumatizes them, eliminates any personalist values they might have gained and causes their psychological deaths.
The headstone symbolizes the last gift Sethe gives her dead daughter: she sells her sex in exchange for the engraving:

She thought it would be enough, rutting among the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on...that should certainly be enough...Those ten minutes she spent pressed against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as any grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. (5)

Sethe thinks that giving all, the greatest gift possible, herself, her body, her dignity and her pride, will be enough to balance the murder. But it is not enough. The baby's spirit does not understand this action; she only knows that Sethe left her alone. Although Sethe's attempt at atoning for the murder fails, she takes responsibility for her actions by trying to make up for the murder, but it does not work.

Sethe counted on the stillness of her own soul to remain sane after the murder, but she "had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl" (15). The baby ghost tries to remind Sethe of her past, of all she attempts to hold away from her. Yet, Sethe tells Paul D, living with the ghost is "easier than somethings" (15), like killing her baby, like opening her legs to pay the engraver, like feeling dirty.

And living with the ghost is easier than running. Sethe says, "No more running-from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth..." (15). In
refusing to run, she challenges anything or anyone who threatens her. The last time she ran, she lost Beloved and before that, Halle. She decides to live with the consequences of not running. In some respects, by not running she takes responsibility for the choices she has made. On the other hand, she remains psychologically dead and irresponsible, because she does not face her painful past.

Although she doesn't run from the town full of disgust or the baby ghost's rage, she spends much energy fighting back the past: "She shivered a little. A light ripple of skin down her arm, which she caressed back into sleep" (14). Again she lulls the memories, the past, back into sleep. "And the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. The 'better life' she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one" (42). In Sethe's mind, as long as no one enslaves and/or dirties her and her children, any other kind of life will do. Because of Sethe's lack of caring as to the kind of life she and her children lead, she fails to provide a space where her children can grown and create themselves, rendering them also psychologically dead.

Sethe survives by holding the past at bay, not by forgetting it, but by disremembering it. Although at times, she feels embarrassed and ashamed by her pride and her decision to kill her children, she does not regret it, nor is her pride in her love for her children diminished (191).

While we can recognize her desire not to feel humiliated and noticing the strength of her pride, her pilfering at the restaurant diminishes an otherwise self-loving and healthy desire. And she knows this: "She despises herself for the pride
that made pilfering better than standing in line...with all the other Negroes" (191).
She justifies taking food from the restaurant because she does not want to wait in line
at the back door of the store and feel humiliated, yet she feels ashamed anyway.
Either way, her self-respect diminishes and shame surfaces.

Her pride acts as a catalyst to keep her from others, from the lines in the back
of Phelps' store, from asking for a ride home, from eating or allowing Denver to eat
any of the dishes the neighbors prepared for Baby Suggs' funeral. Sethe tries to
create herself, uphold her dignity, but fails, due in part, to slavery and the subsequent
choices she has made.

At times, her pride also allows her to feel stronger than the other women in
the neighborhood. And they know it. They direct their outrage, not at the physical
act of murder, but at her pride and her claims. The neighbors agree that, "Her
outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand" Sethe come on difficult
times (254). Too much, they think, she claims too much. They view her willingness
to fight alone and survive as audacity, and it offends them. Sethe survives things the
neighbors believed she'd neither do nor survive (47). Even Ella, Baby Suggs' long
time friend, views Sethe's crime as staggering, but in Ella's mind, Sethe's pride
"outstepped even that" (256). Ella insinuates that Sethe had the help of an evil
spirit, not a white girl, when she escaped from slavery and successfully crossed the
Ohio River (187).

Sethe's actions (the murder) show a distorted form of personalism, which,
along with other factors, leads to the turmoil of not only her life but of Denver's as
well. Sethe takes pride in her strength and the degree of responsibility she has taken. But her claiming of responsibility and her distortion of personalism does not lead to growth. The community, offended by her independence, by the fact an ex-slave should have so much strength, retaliates by ignoring her. They no longer see her as part of the community; they disown her and ignore their part in the events that lead to the murder. And by doing so, they recoil from personalism and personalist values.

During eighteen years of alienation, Sethe's isolation has deprived her of any dreams of her own (20). She survives by not going "inside"--inside her head or her dreams. She lives only in the present for years, beats back the past: "Nothing better than that [working dough] to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73). She cares for Denver and her own basic physical needs, like food and shelter, but she has stopped creating herself or providing a space for Denver to create herself. Sethe survives day to day by suppressing emotions, memories and by not seeing the beauty and the colors of nature around her.

As a psychologically dead character, Sethe watches accidents, tragedies, and unnatural acts without feeling:

She's the one who never looked away, who when a man got stamped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer's restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began to eat her litter did not look away either. (12)

After Here Boy is thrown against the wall by the baby ghost, she calmly resets his leg. Her composed and unfeeling response to Here Boy, her non-response to other
tragedies, demonstrates her isolation from "normality."

With Paul D's arrival, Sethe begins to notice beauty and remember sorrow. In the first step toward healing, he makes her weep. He breaks the isolation, beats the table until the baby ghost leaves, and gives Sethe incentive to think of a future, with or without him.

Paul D also brings new, eighteen year old news that fills some of the holes, blank spaces, questions in Sethe's past. Color, which she has not seen since the baby's red blood and the pink gravestone chips, returns to her life. He breaks her isolation, both physically and emotionally, and Sethe reluctantly starts believing in a future. She tells stories Denver has never heard before, about the past and Sweet Home. She begins to claim her past, her life on Sweet Home, begins to re-create herself, but remembers something she forgot she knew and stops (61). Despite the isolation and emptiness of those years, Sethe's pride and conviction in her choice and her claims, remain strong. She has the ability to struggle against other people's values and ideas; but the slave catchers forced her into making a choice between slavery and death, and either choice ends in disaster for her and her children.

Sethe's decision to try to take the children and herself to the other side and the murder itself, changed Baby Suggs' life, resulted in the baby spirit frightening Howard and Buglar away, isolated Denver and made her afraid of people, and obliged Sethe to constantly hold the past at bay. However, if Sethe hadn't killed the baby, her family would have been beaten, raped, stripped of their dignity, separated and sold.

93
All these years Sethe has not counted on anything, not felt anything and after Paul D arrives she wonders if it's all right to think and feel again. In the process of awakening from psychological death, Sethe shares some of her pain, confronts some memories, but does not tell Paul D everything.

Finally, she decides to take Baby Suggs' advice, "to lay it all down, sword and shield" (173), after eighteen years of solitary life and a few months with Paul D. His presence encourages her to create and love herself, and to provide a place for Denver to do so also. He tells her to go in: "cause I catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall" (48). His arrival "begins their long and excruciating process of thawing frozen feeling" (Bowers 64).

When he asks her about the newspaper clipping, she circles round the subject talking about the crawling--already? girl and the white stairs she loved to climb, all the while wheeling, wheeling around the room: "The smile broke in two and became a sudden suck of air, but she did not shudder or close her eyes, she wheeled" (150). She does not feel ashamed, nor does she regret her choice; she takes responsibility for it, for what happened, for the death, yet keeps circling the subject (161). Paul D tells her her love is too thick and she claims too much. Although she talks about things like other women, Paul D notices that "what she meant could cleave the bone" (164). The murder of her own child upsets Paul D, but her claim and her pride frightens him more.

On the day Paul D appears on Sethe's front porch, he allows her to remember some of her past and then gives her body back to her (189), but in his leaving, his
inability to understand her decision and her pride, he leaves Sethe more vulnerable than before. He breaks down walls, ends her isolation and then abandons her again. Angry at herself for trusting Paul D, allowing emotions to surface and beauty to appear, Sethe tries to quickly close herself back up, but not before she recognizes the young woman she’s taken into her home is her dead daughter. After Paul D leaves, she curses herself for letting him in so quickly, for not staying isolated; at the same time, she cries because she is completely isolated again. And she jumps into caring for Beloved—obsessively so. In her obsession, Sethe physically, emotionally and spiritually deteriorates and moves further and further away from creating herself and from personalist values.

Sethe, oblivious to Beloved’s real identity, doesn’t notice the images, symbols and smells of birth and babies which surround Beloved. At the sight of Beloved, Sethe’s bladder fills and the release is reminiscent of birthing. Sethe’s body senses something her mind will not allow to enter into her consciousness. Beloved’s breath smells like milk, and her touch feels the same as the baby ghost’s touch. At one point in the clearing, Beloved tries to nurse. Sethe responds with, "You too old for that" (98), but doesn’t connect the woman-Beloved with her dead baby. Although Denver notices the images and symbols, Sethe, just awakening from her psychological death, and enchanted by Paul D, by being in love again, doesn’t notice anything until Paul D leaves.

The song Beloved sings, the one Sethe sang to her children, provides the final link which forces Sethe to realize, to recognize, Beloved as a reincarnation of her
dead daughter. Sethe rejoices. But Sethe’s short-lived happiness turns into an obsession, which almost leads to her death. Sethe celebrates rediscovering her daughter by taking Beloved and Denver ice skating. As they slip and slide on the ice, the repeated refrain, "Nobody saw them falling " (174) foreshadows the evil to come.

Immediately after Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter, she releases all the memories she has been holding back; she thinks about all the things she doesn’t have to remember or explain: passing Paul A hanging on a tree, the sound that might have been a shot (202), the afternoon in the shed, the killing of her child and that what she did changed Baby Suggs’ life (184). Sethe remembers her past, not because she wants to confront and heal from her past, but rather because she thinks she does not have to remember it anymore. She moves toward depersonalization and in effect, begins to uncreate herself.

Because Beloved has come back to her from the dead, Sethe believes Beloved will listen to the reasons Sethe had to kill Beloved when she was a baby. In Sethe’s mind, Beloved’s presence gives Sethe permission to stop fighting the past: "she came back to me of her own free will. I don’t have to explain a thing" (200). As the only one who Sethe feels needs to understand her act all those years before, the only one she owes an explanation to, Beloved holds all the power in their relationship because Sethe gives it to her.

After Sethe’s discovery of her daughter Beloved, she ignores the world outside her own, outside 124. The three shadows she saw the day of the carnival did not include Paul D, she decides, but Beloved. After work, she hurries home, the place
where everything is connected yet nothing is: "the no-time" (191). She regresses backward; any kind of self-discovery, self-creation she has made, dissipates. Losing her job, Sethe not only isolates herself, Denver and Beloved further, but ignores any personalist values she had before and precipitates the avalanche of events which lead Denver to ask the neighbors for help.

Beloved's influence is not completely negative as she helps Sethe to recognize some assemblage of reality. Sethe thought there were some good whitefolks, then after the murder, she doesn't think about whitefolks, or people in general, she simply works. However, after she acknowledges Beloved as her daughter, she cuts off from whites totally, wishing she had done so before: "All news of them should have stopped with the birds in her hair" (188). Before whites had power, since Beloved is back they don't; in Sethe's mind, no one has power over Sethe but Beloved.

The joy of the reunion wears off as Sethe tries over and over again to explain to Beloved (the young woman) the reasons she murdered Beloved (her baby). The young woman not only refuses to accept and forgive, she doesn't listen. She acts like Sethe, wears her clothes, copies her movements, the way she holds her head and sighs through her nose (241). Sethe desperately wants to make Beloved realize that far worse than her death, than her feeling abandoned, is what Baby Suggs died of: "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that come to mind" (251). She fights with wanting forgiveness and not wanting to have it, as that would admit she's done something wrong.

Sethe "sat around like a rag doll, broke down, finally from trying to take care
of and make up for" (243). Beloved’s refusal to listen or to understand destroys Sethe, who neglects all responsibility. Denver observes, "It was as though her mother had lost her mind...She played with Beloved’s hair, braiding, puffing, tying, oiling it until it made Denver nervous to watch her" (240).

Eventually, not only do the women ex-change roles, Sethe becoming the child and Beloved the mother, but the relationship deteriorates into abuse. Beloved verbally abuses, then physically abuses Sethe who allows it. Sethe does not admit to anything beside "rough love," but her guilt denies her the ability to chastise Beloved for her infantile and abusive behavior. Unable to step away from the situation and observe, Sethe’s past actions, especially her decision to take responsibility by killing her children finally result in her devastation.

As the only one in the world Sethe feels she owes something to, Beloved demands more than Sethe can give and although she has always been strong and independent, Sethe finally surrenders:

She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur (250, my emphasis).

Sethe surrenders, gives control over to Beloved and in doing so further disassembles herself and moves closer toward depersonalization. But Beloved, as Otten points out, returns with the unrelenting mother-love Sethe claims (92). The fighting is not one sided. When Beloved quiets, "Sethe got her going again" (252). Both participate in
the abuse. Otten adds that Beloved and Sethe, "while threatening their counterparts by their own will power, they nonetheless make self-discovery possible" (8). As their complex mother/daughter and love/hate relationship continues, Sethe's physical and mental capacities deteriorate.

The neighbor women's appearance in front of 124 and their musical voices finally stop the deterioration of Sethe's mental state, pull her out of the obsessive relationship and back to the loving and hopeful days in the clearing. But when Sethe sees the Mr. Bodwin with his whip approaching, she thinks he is Schoolteacher and tries to kill again; this time she attempts to kill the whiteman who has no intentions of hurting her or her children. But Ella and Denver stop her. In attempting to attack Mr. Bodwin, Sethe achieves exorcism; this time she offers herself and saves Beloved. In her desire to protect Beloved, she holds personalist values; however, in her action, that of offering herself instead of Beloved, she is not a personalist. Personalism calls for people to take responsibility for the evils of the world as much as they are able. This does not include destroying the self for someone else.

The neighbors, specifically Ella, show personalist values in their attempt to rid Sethe of her ghost-daughter. In freeing her, they begin the process of allowing her to learn from Beloved, from the obsessive relationship. But Paul D finally coaxes her back into the realm of the living.

After Beloved disappears, Paul D returns to 124 and tries to revive Sethe. He tells her that her children are not her best thing, but she is: "You you're best thing Sethe. You are" (273). To which she answers, "Me? Me?" (273). She welcomes
the idea with surprise, and wants to believe him. The novel ends on a note of hope for Sethe. Although she feels fragmented, isolated, distanced and abandoned by everyone--from her mother, to Paul D, to Beloved--with Paul D’s encouragement, she may take responsibility for herself.

With the passage of time, Sethe, like everyone else, forgets Beloved, forgets the women and men from slave ships. The unknown sounds become the weather: wind in the trees, animals scampering about; "certainly no clamor for a kiss" (275).

Clearly, despite the refrain, "It was not a story to remember" (275), Morrison does not want the story ignored. She encourages the release of memory, after recognition is made and healing occurs. Release simply means not dwelling on or living in the past. Mobley writes:

Our response to the text’s apparent final call for silence and forgetting is not that at all. Instead, it is an ironic reminder that the process of consciously remembering…empowers us to tell the difficult stories that must be passed on. (197)

Sethe’s story represents one of the millions that should be told and remembered. Manifested in Beloved, the symbol, the story is also a reminder of the slaves who after being ripped from their homes and home land, died agonizing deaths of starvation, dehydration and disease.

Morrison encourages undertaking a journey into the past, both a journey into one’s own history and the history of one’s ancestors; this journey develops an
understanding of the self and makes embracing personalism possible. As inferred previously, her characters exemplify this theory. Beloved (the woman) and Beloved (the baby spirit), do not take the journey into the past. They live in their present. Beloved, both the physical woman and the baby spirit, actually live in a past event, the murder, which they never move beyond. Beloved is not capable of assessing the past, of the journey through grief and struggle to understanding.

Baby Suggs does not ignore the traumatic events she has survived. She notices differences, but does not journey back. She chooses another route to healing. Gifted with a big heart, she encourages the healing of others by changing the way they view themselves and, in effect, preparing them for the future. But when intense conflict arises, Baby quits. Eventually, after she dies, Baby’s spirit recognizes, remembers and accepts her past and shares her knowledge with Denver: know the danger and proceed. And in doing so, Baby’s spirit holds personalist values.

On the other hand, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved, (the symbol) at some point in their lives, recognize and remember the past, which, although exceedingly painful, leads them to recovery, to growth, to self-love and finally to personalist values. When Sethe or Denver dis-remember or deny the past, their growth stops. They survive because they eventually remember the past, because they have remembered and journeyed through it.

All three characters, and even to some extent Beloved, attempt to create themselves at least once. They also, at some point in their lives, hold values akin to those found in personalism. But because of the psychological and physical results of
slavery, as well as choices they have made, the process of creating themselves is a journey fraught with difficulties. In their success and in their failure, the characters' experiences emphasize the difficulty of experiencing grief and exploring history.

The "novel is, finally, about putting stories together and putting them to rest" (Rushdy 592). In the final analysis, Morrison encourages readers to embrace personalism taking responsibility for the past, the pain of history. By experiencing the grief, remembering bits and pieces at a time, the pain does not overwhelm, yet its power emanates. Morrison's use of repetition in this novel serves not only to refocus the reader, but to reinforce the reality, the horrors, the continual and repeated offenses. In writing this novel, Morrison recognized the grief of the period, and did not want to go "back into and through grief" (Russel 45). The characters experience the grief of their past, a process which at times is neither growth nor stasis, but regression.

Through uncovering specific instances where characters succeed and others in which they fail to create themselves, Morrison's underlying message appears. It's not a direct call to action, but a recognition of past horrors and abuses, of memory and dis-remembering, of self-creation, of personalism and of denial. In her recognition and her remembering, Morrison not only encourages readers to remember the past, in pieces if the entire memory is too much, but to heal, know the danger, and persist.
While some may not agree with the philosophy of personalism, when we use it as a lens to interpret these novels it offers insight into the characters' minds. The lens serves as one way of exploring the novel. Through it we have looked at three main concepts (all influenced by the acceptance or denial of responsibility). The first concept focused on active verses passive characters. Active characters grow and learn; they succeed and fail because they take risks. Passive characters fear taking risks and as a result do not grow. The second concept, interrelated to the first, explores the influences of Western society’s values on characters’ lives. The third concept encompasses both previous concepts and moves toward a suggested solution: despite fear, take risks and fight evil, particularly racism (in every form).

Within the first and the second concept, we discovered the ramifications of those passive characters who accept middle class values and beliefs. We see the people (in the form of her characters) that Morrison criticizes, those "who accept and seek to adapt themselves to middle class standards of behavior, rather than venture out on their own winds" (Hovet and Lounsberry 122).

Through the analysis of the main characters', in The Bluest Eye and Beloved, we also see a journey to self-creation, and a change in the development of the characters. Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, primarily passive characters, accept the society’s norms, and rarely examine their thought processes; they focus on the physical, the external part of themselves. Sethe, on the other hand, passionately defies accepted norms; she strives for a better life for herself, but more importantly, in her mind, she strives for a better life for her children. But despite her willingness
to take risks, to question values and standards, powers beyond Sethe’s control influence her and her children’s lives.

White people, like Schoolteacher, often hold and abuse their power; however, African Americans, like Pauline and Sethe’s neighbors, also hold and abuse their power. Pauline encouraged her daughter’s distorted vision of herself, instead of confronting it. Sethe’s neighbors did not warn her that the slave catchers were coming, that a power greater than her own was coming to enslave everyone she fought to free. The abuse of power comes mainly from white people’s action or inaction. More abstractly, destructive power also comes from the intense pressure to accept white values.

Within the first two concepts, we explored factors effecting characters’ lives, then recognized society’s responsibility (i.e., everyone who does not question society’s values) for characters’ distorted lives and characters’ responsibility for actions and choices. We actively went into the past, into memory which is "a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was--that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way" (Morrison "Memory Creation, and Writing" 135).

The third concept, that of taking responsibility for fighting evil, appears in the growth and the movement of the characters themselves and in Morrison’s growth as a writer. Morrison moves from depicting characters, in The Bluest Eye, who although partially capable of making choices, accept the values of the white society. Their stories, particularly Pecola’s, elicit pity. Then Morrison moves to depicting
characters in *Beloved* who, also adversely influenced by society, fight the overwhelming power of whites, fight and fail but often, after a respite, resume the fight. The characters in *The Bluest Eye* do not, perhaps cannot, struggle for self-creation like the characters in *Beloved*. Characters in *Beloved* do not simply accept but struggle to change.

Denver and perhaps Sethe’s ability to create themselves reflects Morrison’s growth, her willingness to fight, to take a stand, to fail and to know failure, to know isolation and psychic death, to journey into the past to know all the dangers and persist: continue telling stories, continue writing, expressing pain, uncovering history and methods of survival. She fights the evils of racism and sexism by exposing them.

In order to be functional, Morrison says that her work must sift through the past:

...it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them; it should not even attempt to solve social problems, but it should certainly try to clarify them.

("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 389)

Morrison clarifies some social problems in these novels and she, without recognizing it as such, embraces personalism by continuing the fight against the evils of racism
and sexism. She uses inventive techniques like magical realism to explore these confusing and painful stories, and exposes part of the confusion as to who should take responsibility for the Pecolas and Beloveds of the world. And finally she exposes the fact that we all must take responsibility.
END NOTES

1. For more information on the history of personalism see A.C. Knudson's *The Philosophy of Personalism*, New York, 1927.


3. *Le Personnalisme* by Emmanuel Mounier was first published in France in 1950. In 1952 it was translated by Philip Mairet.

4. For further reading on the history of the use of a convention, like the primary reader, found in 18th, 19th and 20th century Afro-American texts, see Michael Awkward's "Roadblocks and Relatives: Critical Revision in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye.*"


7. Other Black families live in poverty, but the Breedloves’ poverty lacks character. The pieces, sticks of furniture must have memories, bring back some kind of remembrance of something that happened, in order to have character. The Breedloves’ furniture does not offer much history; the sofa simply elicits humiliation, reminds them they were cheated. They gain no enjoyment from owning it (TBE 32). The sofa even spreads its misery "throughout the house and limits the delights of things not related to it" (TBE 33). The Breedlove family's assortment of cheap material possessions brings them discomfort, inverting the myth that owning things provides stability and security against being "put outdoors."

8. Although Holloway's essay shows insight, in the first page she refers to Pecola as an "ugly child" twice, when no evidence of Pecola's ugliness exists, only the consensus of a group of characters who believe in the standards of beauty. The characters who do not fully believe in the myth, Claudia, Frieda, Mrs. MacTeer and the prostitutes, do not refer to her as ugly.

9. It is interesting to note that Pecola doesn't call her "mother," "mom" or even Pauline. She and everyone else identifies her as Mrs. Breedlove. Only when the narrator accounts Pauline's childhood does the narrator use Pauline.
10. They are capable, unwielding women who know they run white people's households, but humbly don't make it known. They humbly take care of their husbands and children (TBE 110). When these women get old they become 'free': "They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested" (TBE 110). The only freedom Black women receive occurs when in old age, but for Pauline, this 'freedom' will never come because of her acceptance of the myth.

11. In general, people put outdoors lack consideration for others (i.e. eating too much, using too much coal, TBE 17). The community responds to the fear of being put outdoors by buying material possessions, especially houses. Owning concrete materials lessens the fear, as they provide security.

12. Yet, Pecola can only guess as to what love feels like: "Maybe that was love. Choking sound and silence" (TBE 48-49). The love the prostitutes give her, almost incomprehensible to her, is so little compared to the love Claudia and Frieda receive.


14. For an in-depth look into Geraldine's perception of Pecola, see Miner pp. 186.

15. This assertion stems from my experience working with adult survivors of sexual assault at Women's Place in Missoula, MT. Survivors reactions vary from person to person, but most include one or more of the following: disbelief, denial, blaming self, fear, distrust, insecurity, loss of knowledge of boundaries, confusion and anger. For more information see The Courage to Heal by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, Harper and Row: New York, 1988.

16. The perpetrator of incest, molester of young girls from town, he describes his actions as the "tasteless loving of those which belonged to members of my family" (TBE 141). He further admits, "I couldn't...keep my hands, my mouth, off them" [little girls' breasts]. Conscious of the evil he does, Soaphead blames God, claiming God allows little girls to be so lonely they come to him. By molesting girls, he also punishes God for not being more aware of "His" children, not protecting children like Pecola. "I loved her," Soaphead claims (TBE 143).

17. The argument can be made that her choices have been so limited by her environment that she never really has a choice as to what direction her life will take. Following this logic then, one must concede that she is completely powerless, which means she has no free will, or not enough to change her life. If we deny that she has any ability to choose, she becomes a complete victim, a flat character.
18. As late as 1892, anti-slavery attorneys and law makers pointed to Margaret Garner’s story as proof that African Americans were not content as slaves. This wildly understated conclusion slowly gained acceptance. For an in-depth look at the facts and the effects of Garner’s story, see Rushdy 569-70;572-74.

19. For more information on who and what Beloved symbolizes, see Bowers or Samuels and Hudson-Weems.

20. Sixo provides a good example. He risked his life every time he went out at night. Denied the company of women, Sixo searches one out, walking all night to meet her. Out of all the slaves at Sweet Home, he is the one most aware of his situation. Schoolteacher’s questions upset him, whereas the other slaves think his questions are stupid. Even in his fiery death, he laughs because the woman he loves carries his seed; his spirit lives on.

21. Despite their increased freedom and respect, creating one’s self remains nearly impossible. One way to do so is to attempt escape. Some slaves who assume responsibility for themselves do not literally own themselves. Sixo does this in his search for thirty-mile woman.

22. For a more detailed account see House’s article: "Toni Morrison’s Ghost: The Beloved who is not Beloved." In "Ripping the Veil," Samuels and Hudson-Weems also offer substantial evidence that Beloved is the young woman who has been locked in the house by a whiteman.

23. For a look at how Paul D both takes and denies personal responsibility, see Samuel and Hudson-Weems’ article "Ripping the Veil."

24. Denver’s fear of her mother is most apparent in her nightmares. She dreams her mother cuts off Denver’s head, carries it downstairs then brushes and braids Denver’s hair (206-207).

25. Schapiro adds, "Even before she was raped by the white farm boys, Sethe was ravaged as an infant, robbed of her milk/essence by the white social structure" because, as a baby, she was only allowed to nurse two weeks (198).

26. And yet Ella was raped, abused and held by "the lowest yet." She bore a child and killed it. But she takes no pride in her actions, nor were her actions a public as Sethe’s.
Works Cited


110


Russel, Sandi. "It's OK to Say OK." McKay 43-54.


Works Consulted


Tate, Claudia. "Allegories of Black Female Desire: or, rereading Nineteenth-Century Sentimental Narratives of Black Female Authority" Wall 98-126.
