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Mature Child Protagonists: Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

1. Studentka s využitím relevantní sekundární literatury objasní základní pojmy, s nimiž bude pracovat, a stručně nastíní společenský a literární kontext obou zvolených děl – The Bluest Eye Toni Morrisonové a Black Boy Richarda Wrighta.
3. Jádrem práce bude analýza a srovnání protagonistů obou románů, především se zaměřením na odlišnosti jejich postavení vyplývající z rasových a genderových daností, dále na sebe-vnímání a sebe-hodnocení, jejich postavení v rodině a mezi přáteli, jejich vztah k víře na jedné straně a k institucionalizovanému náboženství na straně druhé. Studentka zde bude pracovat především metodou kritické textové analýzy s přesahy do oblastí kulturních studií. Své závěry vhodně doloží primárními texty a opře je o adekvátní teoretické práce.
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Abstract

The purpose of the thesis is to analyse the circumstances typical for a black child living in the South of the United States of America at the beginning of 20th century. Considering the importance of literary sources as another, emotional dimension to historical facts, the novels *Black Boy* by Richard Wright and *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison are taken into account.

The process of identity formation and maturation of the protagonists Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright is related to the issues of their race, gender, family, and religion. While racism in disguise pervaded all aspects of their existence, gender and family were two factors that deteriorated the already existing exposure of both children to violence perpetrated by whites and blacks alike. The thesis questions the presence, rather than existence, of God in both novels.

Key words: Pecola Breedlove, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, *Black Boy*

Souhrn

Účelem této práce je analyzovat okolnosti typické pro dětství a dospívání černošských dětí na Jihu Spojených Států Amerických na počátku 20. století. Literární díla *Black Boy* od Richarda Wrighta a *The Bluest Eye* od Toni Morrisonové tvoří další, emocionální rozměr, který není pokryt historickými fakty.

Proces utváření identity a proces dospívání hrdinů Pecoly Breedlove a Richarda Wrighta úzce souvisí s jejich rasou, genderovou rolí, rodinou, a náboženstvím. Zatímco rasismus v různých formách pronikal do všech stránek jejich bytí, genderové role a rodina byly dva faktory, které ještě zhoršily násilí na těchto dětech páchané jak bělochy, tak černochy. Existence, či raději účast Boha v obou dílech je brána v potaz.

Klíčová slova: Pecola Breedlove, Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, *Black Boy*

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1. Historical, Cultural, and Literary Background

The following part aims at summarising the events that directly influenced the life of black people from 1908 when Richard Wright was born to 1941, the year of Pecola Breedlove's story. It is by no means precise, detailed chronological description of the events, on the contrary, due to the limited space allowed for the introductory part, it is inevitable to list only the most general facts that affected the history of black Americans in the given period of time. Next, the influence of the society changes on American black and white children are considered, together with the importance of literature dealing with the issue of childhood, both fiction and non-fiction, namely novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Black Boy*. The terms "black" and "white" are used as neutral ones, and serve to distinguish two opposed parts of one society, people whose ancestors were of different origin.

In the years that followed after the Civil War, black Americans' hopes for dignified life rose together with the Thirteenth Amendment, the act that abolished slavery. The euphoria of many blacks who longed for freedom, however, was replaced by growing disappointment as they came to realise that on the way to real freedom they still had to overcome such obstacles as prejudice in the society and their tough financial situation.

The position of former slaves could not have changed dramatically from one day to another for two reasons. Firstly, people who were formerly considered a possession did not own any land or other property and therefore they had to start building their positions from scratch. In order to feed their families, they had to work on the land of white people as hard as before. The way to economic independence led through tenancy and sharecropping as illustrated in *The American People*:

The sharecroppers were given seed, fertilizer, farm implements, and all necessary food and clothing to take care of their families. In return, the landlord [...] told them what to grow and how much and took a share—usually a half—of the harvest. (Nash, Jeffrey, 357)

Second, not least damaging influence on the role of black Americans in the society was the experience of former slave system that was still living in the people, affected their

attitudes and behaviour, and that lead to the refusal of southern whites to treat blacks as equals, overpowering the black leaders such as Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist. If it was not for this deep rooted racial prejudice, white people in the South would hardly strip their black fellow citizens from the right to vote and thus influence the governments in southern states. Consequently, the governments lost interest in those whose votes could not reinforce their positions and whites could finish the disfranchisement of black population. Once black people had no influence on politics, it was easy to introduce “Jim Crow” laws and initiate racial segregation in 1875, the segregation that has unchangeably marked the American society. The situation is depicted by J. H. Franklin and A. A. Moss, Jr. as follows:

Blacks and whites were separated on trains, in depots, and on wharves. After the Supreme Court in 1883 outlawed the Civil Rights Acts of 1875, blacks were banned from white hotels, barber shops, restaurants, and theatres. By 1885 most Southern states had laws requiring separate schools. With the adoption of new constitutions the states firmly established the color line by the most stringent segregation of the races [...] (Franklin, Moss, 262)

Both black and white people set a number of organisations that were supposed to represent their varying attitudes. The hunger for equality of black people was personified by many of their leaders, among the first ones were Booker T. Washington and later W. E. B. Du Bois. While Washington believed in self-help and education, more radical Du Bois gathered young militant blacks. Both were significant leaders, admired by the blacks but despised and feared by whites. The organisation called NAACP, i.e. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was established and fought for the equality of rights in the USA, the right to vote, the right to be educated, the right to be treated equal (that was especially needed in court). NAACP hugely contributed to the abolition of lynching and riots, and also won the right for blacks to become soldiers in the Great War. Meanwhile, the cultural centres of the oppressed minority remained schools and churches established short after the Civil War.

The Ku Klux Klan was one of the most powerful organisations organised by whites, inspired by Democrats and racial violence. They intimidated all blacks and whites who

sympathized with blacks especially in small southern towns. Although unlawful secret organizations that oppressed minorities were officially declared illegal, in practice nothing prevented their actions and thus they remained powerful long into the 20th century. What is more, the Ku Klux Klan members became especially active at the beginning of the 20th century and expanded dramatically after the Great War, trying to ensure the black soldiers find their prior inferior positions in the society, denying their positive contribution to the life of the whole nation. Its original purpose, however, was to dissuade blacks from political activities, i.e. either from active candidacy or merely from going to elections, and for their purpose they developed multiple, even violent means as the words of Franklin and Moss clearly documented: “Depriving blacks of political equality became, to them, a holy crusade in which a noble end justified any means.” (Franklin, Moss, 250)

Among other organisations that were supposed to protect the rights of the oppressed belonged the Progressive movement. They attempted to protect the rights of children who often worked in factories from very tiny age because their families were on the edge of actual starvation, they also negotiated shorter working hours for women, but they did nothing to protect the rights of black people nonetheless. Similarly, other experts conclude:

The progressive era was a time when many Americans set out to promote reform because they saw poverty, despair, and disorder in a country transformed by immigration, urbanism, and industrialism. The progressives, largely middleclass whites, sought to help the poor, the immigrants, and the working class, but they rarely worried about blacks. (Nash, 477)

As it is obvious from the above extract, there was no group of people interested in the black issue with the exception of blacks themselves. Unfortunately, the black community, due to its slave predecessors, represented a part of the society that had no economic power and as such was not – and could not – be significant for the legislators. With no influence on the system, the black community had to accept whatever role it was assigned to. The South was an unbearable place for living and therefore large numbers of blacks escaped Jim Crow system northwards, where again they faced other forms of discrimination in housing and jobs.

In result, for the white majority, the black community was a non-existent, shadowy part of the society, living in slums in hopeless conditions. Not only did whites profoundly ignore them, but blacks were also purposefully intimidated whenever they attempted to fit in the white society. The fact that they were oppressed, however, did not mean they did not develop their culture – and Harlem Renaissance, a movement that gathered black American intellectuals, first introduced in New York in 1925 – was the prove.

At the time of Harlem Renaissance emergence, the time when Richard Wright reached the North and Pecola Breedlove was yet to be born, the true racial equality was still a distant future. In the meantime, considering the working class children, black child rearing made little advancement since the times of slavery, the times when children were as a rule separated from their families by the age of sixteen. Despite the maltreatment of black families who were powerless to take any action to protect their children against hunger, family separation or deaths, black people were, in the words of Steven Mintz, getting stronger:

If African-American childhood was harsher than whites ever understood, and if it sometimes inflicted scars that lasted a lifetime, it also left black children with a sense of pride, family and communal loyalty, and resistance to injustice. The strengths it transmitted were all the greater because of the obstacles that young African Americans had endured and overcome. (Mintz, 117)

At the beginning of the 20th century, working children were commonplace as their income meant a significant contribution to a family budget. With the growth of human rights organisations, the number of hours children were allowed to work decreased, and thus the importance of their income diminished and a new trend of “sheltered childhood” appeared. Jennifer Ritterhouse further explains the shift of values:

The upper echelons of the northern working class followed this middle-class example out of similar hopes for their children’s advancement, resulting in a gradual abandonment of the long-standing ideal of the “useful child” – the child who contributed to the family economy as an agricultural or industrial labourer – between the 1870s and 1930s. (Ritterhouse, 58)

Simultaneously with a new idea of sheltered childhood, the donation that was made to education increased. Children's innocence was protected from the nasty world outside, from abuse, hard work, crime or sexuality. This trend, however, did not apply to the black children, especially not the ones living in the South. Ritterhouse supports this idea:

[...] even those white southerners who devoted the most attention and material and emotional resources to their own children rarely saw any but the very youngest black children as innocents or extended the ideal of the sheltered childhood to blacks. (Ritterhouse, 63)

Nevertheless, not all white southern children were fully sheltered – as their racial attitudes were not innate, these had to be taught. For this reason, white parents did not allow their children to play with their black counterparts and step by step taught them that a black person is by no means equal. This instruction was consciously built to ensure the inferior position of blacks, the result of their poverty and social oppression. Ritterhouse named this pattern “racial etiquette”, for the respect with which blacks behaved towards whites was the result of constant manipulation, threat and fear, imposed on them from the position of power. Ritterhouse further specified the scope of competence of “racial etiquette”:

The pattern, ranging from the horrors of lynching to the subtleties of naming, ensured that whites' racism would be perpetuated from one generation to the next – almost always with considerable help from Mom and Dad. (Ritterhouse, 82)

It is evident that it was not the race but the society's perception of the race and the society's action that built constraints and limited the freedom of black Americans. Racism, an unsubstantiated prejudice towards people of different colour, was applied from the position of power and, to add insult to injury, the American society, proclaiming democracy, advocated racism because it served its purpose. For racism there was no justification notwithstanding its well-spread, deep-rooted competence.

The impact of racism (i.e. constant evaluation of the worth of black Americans' existence) on black Americans as individuals was observable because it brought about split

identities, one true and one imposed. Not only were they conscious of who they were, but also of who they were in the eyes of white people. In accordance with the situation, they had to adjust their behaviour, denying their true inner self for the sake of their safety. In the same sense, Ritterhouse quotes the words of Du Bois, who proclaimed:

The nature of American society allowed African Americans to see themselves only “through the revelation of the other world. it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Ritterhouse, 114-115)

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

The memories of all the individuals cannot be tracked down back in history, fortunately, novels exist that are reminiscent of the past fates, either real or unreal. The importance of these dwells in the information they provide to their readers, people distant in both space and time. The authors of the novels, i.e. the bearers of the information, of the thought, decided not to keep it to themselves, not to let it die. With the words written down, the stories come to existence and from then on they are as real as authors themselves, living in the minds of the readership.

Considering the works *The Bluest Eye* and *Black Boy* from the above point of view, both have the same informative function about the life in the USA between 1908 and 1941, despite of the fact that *The Bluest Eye* is fiction and *Black Boy* includes aspects of a biography. The proportion of true facts and art work in *Black Boy* remains disputable because experts provide varied opinions on the issue. For the purpose of this thesis, however, such proportion is insignificant as it is the involvement of both authors, the reflection of their life experience that made the stories of their characters alive. Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright provide sufficient material for the curtain of ignorance to be lifted. Thanks to vivid description of Pecola’s and Richard’s memories and dreams, the reader can understand the feelings and emotions of black American child living at the

beginning of 20th century, and imagine the full extent of Jim Crow impact on the lives of many. Although the thoughts and emotions depicted in the novels may not be real, they are nonetheless truthful description of the nature and depth of emotions that people felt in the situations of social degradation, and therefore they deserve to be treated seriously and with respect.

Both novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Black Boy* are regarded as “Bildung” or “initiation stories” as they depict the development of a child, the loss of childhood innocence and its causes. Pecola and Richard were just two in millions – and these two concrete stories uncover additional dimension to historical facts. Pin-chia Feng, an expert, considers any fiction or autobiography that depicts “the identity formation of an ethnic woman” a Bildungsroman. (Pin-chia Feng, 15) Were her words extended also to a writing of an ethnic man and applied to the stories of Pecola and Richard, the two novels could serve as a good comparison of both genders within one ethnic group, social strata, and the same period in history.

2. Racial Issue

Richard Wright and Pecola Breedlove lived in similar conditions of poor, malfunctioning southern families that did not provide them with much shelter in difficult times of Jim Crow. Richard's and Pecola's sameness caused by their surroundings was overshadowed by their difference stemming from their inner worlds. For the comparison of their racial self, some of the aspects that affected their development within their social group are discussed in the following passage.

Having accepted the term "race", it is presumed that a set of differences between blacks and whites is defined and listed, with focus on such differences that affected young lives of both blacks and whites and their mutual encounters in the South of the USA in the 1st half of the 20th cent. Considering aspects that were related and that played a vital role in one's personality and character formation, the point of self-identification within a social group is also included.

The term "race" was used and abused by white people to stigmatize black people, to make them bleed, to make them accept their inferiority, to question their humanity. The persecution of blacks did not happen without reason – firstly, whites did not want to lose their advantageous position in the society, secondly, there was a long-held tradition of racial oppression that was conscientiously handed over from generation to generation. However, maintaining the position of the stronger was not easy because it was not easily justifiable. Therefore, racial "principle" was introduced to young children, to children whose intellect was not developed enough to be able to doubt it, although they may have dimly felt its inappropriateness before they adopted it fully. In result, the black and white children alike were influenced and shaped by racism. As Ritterhouse claims in *Growing Up Jim Crow*:

Like other dominant groups in other contexts, whites in the South had to work hard, primarily to counter black resistance but also to co-opt all members of white society, including their own children. (Ritterhouse, 13)

In order to maintain the dominant position, white people did not hesitate to expose their children to all possible, even the most violent forms of racism, lynching included. Ritterhouse stated that “the fact is that white children’s exposure to black corpses was commonplace.” (Ritterhouse, 75)

Furthermore, Ritterhouse claims that executions of blacks were cultural events that nobody wanted to miss. Whole trains were dispatched in order to transport the expectant audience to the place of an execution, people were freed from work and children from school. (74) Vágnerová, a psychologist, defines the process of socialization and its possible impact on the mind of a young individual in the following way: From the point of view of psychological development, social (or more precisely socio-cultural) factors are the most important for the development of specifically human behaviour, i.e. for example the ability of verbal communication and auto-regulation of one’s own behaviour in accordance with social norms. (2005, 16)

With the social norms defined above, white children were not taught to respect and treat blacks as equal human beings. On the contrary, they were taught to stay indifferent to the humiliation, injustice and cruelty perpetrated against blacks, inevitably growing into perpetrators themselves.

Drawing a line between the whites’ conception of a society and the position of black people within that society, the lives of the latter were deadly affected, constrained and very often ruined. The freedom of a black individual was limited, his/her feelings defined, his/her acts were above all to serve the whites. The attitudes, opinions, intelligence and personality of a black individual made little or no difference unless they offended a white individual. Still, black individuals living in the Jim Crow South longed to maintain their attitudes and opinions, to develop their intelligence and personality. Thus, being forced to live in the system they did not approve of, every black individual adopted his/her own strategy of how to cope with the stress that stemmed from the asymmetry of the social role and innermost thoughts, feelings, desires.

Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright represent two antonyms in their reactions to racial oppression, to the society where one race was superior to the other. While Richard never approved of the white supremacy, did not respect and follow its overt or implied

rules, Pecola absorbed the white culture and identified herself with it. In the words of Powell, a critic: “Pecola Breedlove fails to discover a true self precisely because she allows her values to be dictated by the white mythology.” (Powell, 752)

However different were their attitudes to Jim Crow, one feature made them connected – the fact that their behaviour was neither expected nor approved of. The process of socialisation previously defined by Vágnerová is applicable to Richard’s and Pecola’s behaviour and therefore it is obvious that they had little influence on their personality development. Long before they were fully aware of it, the process of racial awareness was initiated by their parents, who were the first to imprint the laws into pure minds of their children.

Richard Wright, unlike Pecola, depicted one sharp moment when he for the first time consciously realised that race differentiation existed. He and his mother travelled from Mississippi to Arkansas and visited Richard’s grandmother in Jackson on the way.

At last we were at the railroad station with our bags, waiting for the train that would take us to Arkansas; and for the first time I noticed that there were two lines of people at the ticket window, a ‘white’ line and a ‘black’ line. During my visit at Granny’s a sense of the two races had been born in me with a sharp concreteness that would never die until I died. (Wright, 44)

From this moment on, he could not stop to ask, questioning his mother: “Then what am I?” (Wright, 47) and the knowledge of two different races – one privileged, one disadvantaged – was from then on an ever-present fellow that accompanied Richard wherever he went, although he could truly realise its full significance in the years to come. In an effort to protect him against premature disillusionment, his mother did not provide Richard with the answers to all his questions, still she did not manage to extinguish his curiosity.

[...] but I knew that there was something my mother was holding back. She was not concealing facts, but feelings, attitudes, convictions which she did not want me to know [...]. (Wright, 47)

As Richard grew up, so grew the awareness of limitations that his skin colour brought about. Especially later at work did Richard realise that as a black man, he can never achieve higher position and earn money that would allow him to travel north. Furthermore, the fact that he was constantly denigrated and that he was forced to hide his true emotions was for him of the same importance. Richard, similarly to other young blacks in the South, wanted to hope for better future, unfortunately he did not dare to. In his heart, he was secretly hoping that morality existed – somewhere else, in the distant North, in distant future. The following dialogue of Richard and his friends illustrates such hope:

“A colored man’s all right up north.” Justifying flight.

“They say a white man hit a colored man up north and that nobody did a damn thing!” Urgent wish to believe in flight.

“Man for man up there.” Begging to believe in justice. (Wright, 78)

At the age of fifteen, Richard considered his future job and concluded that he “could be a porter like [his] father before [Richard], but what else?” (Wright, 165) and that was in fact his first job after he left school in 1925. At that time, due to more frequent encounters with white people, a series of accidents multiplied in Richard’s life. Even though he believed he was “learning rapidly how to watch white people, to observe their every move, every fleeting expression, how to interpret what was said and what left unsaid” (Wright, 183), in his effort to control his gestures and expression he was not successful enough. As his friend Griggs told him: “You act around white people as if you didn’t know that they were white. And they *see* it.” (Wright, 186) In result, Richard was beaten by white men for not saying “sir” or nearly arrested by police for walking in white quarters late at night. After all he was dismissed from his job for his “looks”.

These were just minor accidents compared to much more serious offence that was still to come in Richard’s new job in an optical company. His new Yankee boss, Mr. Crane, wanted to “instruct [him] in the mechanics of grinding and polishing lenses.” (Wright, 189) It was a duty of two white men, Pease and Crane, who considered Richard a threat to their working position and therefore they decided to dissuade him from promotion by bullying him. In Richard’s words, the state of affairs was as follows:

If I said: No, sir, Mr. Pease, I never called you Pease, I would by inference have been calling Reynolds a liar; and if I had said: Yes, sir, Mr. Pease, I called you Pease, I would have been pleading guilty to the worst insult that a Negro can offer to southern white man. (Wright, 191)

Despite the fact that Richard attempted to justify his position later, any attempt to keep the job was futile as the hostility of the environment and his superiors would cause more serious problems than beatings. Instead, he still longed for better life and career that would not degrade his intelligence, life that was unachievable. As Richard explains this emotion:

In me was shaping yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. (Wright, 170)

For Pecola, the feeling of humiliation was more intensive than for Richard as for her feeling of blackness she does not need other people. Importantly, her encounters with white people are not depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, still white people affected her indirectly but decidedly by the means of her parents. Her mother, Pauline, idealised the white society and loved the house of her employers, while her own family reminded her of the sad reality that she herself would never be rich, blond, and admired. The sharp contrast between the idealised life and her own, ruined one gradually changed Pauline's character. Finally, long before Pecola was born, Pauline's struggle resulted in the feeling of hatred of whatever reminded her of her own blackness. Having found no support in her mother, Pecola could not definitely rely on her father, Cholly, an amoral character whose life was full of constant pain from feeling impotent and weak, and who thus felt irresistible compulsion to prove the opposite by the means of violence. In another words, making a connection with "Dick-and-Jane" idealised white world where people live in "green-and-white" houses, an expert claimed that:

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

Pauline, Cholly and their experience with white people were the causes of Pecola's devastated fate. From the time of her infancy, Pauline despised her daughter, considered her poor, ugly and worthless. Interestingly, Pauline did not lack maternal feelings, she just directed them towards the white children of her masters rather than towards her own ones. The more she admired, cared for and loved the “white angels”, the more spiteful she was to her own blood. The following extract proves this:

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

The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it.” (Morrison, 85)

As if she was not tortured enough by the violence of her parents, Pecola suffered more due to unquestionable acceptance of the imposed values. By contrasting herself with Shirley Temple, she found herself the most insignificant. She mistook the white, blond, singing film star for the only beauty code that existed, making her own black, black, black existence excruciating, unacceptable and intolerable. Every single hair curl on Shirley Temple's head made the contrast between her and Pecola more striking, and, despite the fact that no objective beauty scale has ever existed (and even if it did, it would definitely not measure the worth of somebody's existence), Pecola concluded that she had no right to be happy as her beauty did not compare with Shirley's and in result she attributed all her tragedies to her appearance. However mistaken Pecola might have been, her conclusion to a great extent reflected the biased world around her. Clearly, being under the constant scrutiny, being beaten and abused was agonizing enough, but Pecola brought her suffering

to extreme by sacrificing herself willingly, by admitting she was worthless, hoping in the unachievable.

Juxtaposing Pecola with her peers, her reactions to what was generally considered beautiful were the reversed ones. A little white icon Shirley Temple and a new classmate Maureen Peal, who was “a high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes” (Morrison, 47) were wholeheartedly hated by Claudia and Frieda, Pecola’s closest friends, while the same idols were genuinely admired by Pecola. By their hatred, Claudia and Frieda expressed the disrespect of fashion imposed on them by others, they maintained their own standards, standards that allowed them to retain their own worth despite opinion of the teachers, parents, friends, public.

We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness. [...] And all the time we knew Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us. (Morrison, 57)

Were Richard and Pecola compared from the point of view of their dignity, they would be identified as absolute opposites. While Richard had to be cautious as his contempt for whites and their behaviour was frequently accompanied by a corresponding expression in his face, Pecola’s feeling of inferiority could not be more deep and complex, shining through her every gesture. As he was growing up, Richard had to learn how to control his expression gradually, painfully, learning new facts during his numerous encounters with whites. Pecola was bearing the pain inside her all the time, her feeling of unworthiness became part of herself and for that reason she could not keep her head up even if she decided to (which she did not). In the words of Pin-chia Feng, an expert, “Pecola’s ‘growing down’ fleshes out the work of imposed oppression and racial neurosis.” (Pin-chia Feng, 40)

Richard provoked white people to violent attacks because he did not keep his eyes down, Pecola provoked everyone because she did. The reason why both of them provoked violent attacks is the same – they were both black. Their different attitudes can be explained by different aims they wanted to achieve in order to be free people. Richard longed for

going north in order to escape, Pecola dreamt about blue eyes that would enable her to experience happiness. Both of them were victimized by people who hoped to raise their respect mainly because they felt their position was for some reason uncertain. As the following extract from *Black Boy* illustrates, verbal terrorisation may be as vicious as physical one:

‘What do niggers think about?’ he asked.
‘I don’t know, sir,’ I said, my head still averted.
‘If I was a nigger, I’d kill myself,’ he said.
I said nothing. I was angry.
‘You know why?’ he asked.
I still said nothing.
‘But I don’t reckon niggers mind being niggers,’ he said suddenly and laughed. (Wright, 190)

Richard’s raising anger can be interpreted as a consequence of the feeling that he was not treated righteously, that according to his own standards he deserved to be treated with respect. Pecola, on the other hand, reconciled herself with her fate, and with the exception of pleading God for blue eyes she did nothing, in everyday encounters, to protect herself against mockery, beatings, or rape. However, her passivity must not be confused with indifference, apathy or insensitivity. The reverse is the case – she was always paralysed with horror and at the same time too weak to counteract. This is in agreement with the way Geta LeSeur portrays Pecola’s character:

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

All in all, having considered the social issues that affected the life of a black individual, the characters of Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright became prisoners, their freedom was limited and the primary cause was their race. If it was not for their blackness, both of them would have lived more contented lives – it was the race that caused a change

in Pauline's character, it was the race that allowed white men to expose Cholly to his impotence. It was the race that prevented Richard from earning money and leaving Mississippi. While Richard, owing to the circumstances, faced financial problems and thus was bound to one place, Pecola, mainly because of her mother, was locked in her body by her own mind. It was nothing but the race that started the chain of events leading to children's vigilance, a feature that is not attributable to a happy childhood.

3. The Role of Parents

For better understanding of the black family in the Jim Crow South in general, and the influences on Pecola Breedlove's and Richard Wright's parents in particular, one has to consider the historical, cultural and social background that directly affected the conception of child-rearing of an individual. After setting the general background, the characters of Richard's and Pecola's parents are discussed both individually and in relation to their children.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the phenomenon of American middle-class family and understanding of parental roles developed from the idea of a useful child who contributed to the family budget to the idea of a vulnerable one that should be protected and sheltered. As Steven Mintz recorded:

During the half-century between 1880 and 1930, parent-child relations underwent a profound transformation. Middle-class family life grew more democratic, affectionate, and child-centred, and the school and the peer group became more significant in young people's lives. (Mintz, 215)

Sadly, this trend excluded working-class black families whose children still experienced hunger and fear of being attacked, feelings common for slave children. Black family as a unit had to surmount unnatural intrusion of white American society – ranging from sales of family relatives in the times of slavery to the period after the Civil War when the families of former slaves struggled economically. At the beginning of the 20th century, the working-class blacks, who spent most of their days at work, did not have time for rearing and protection of their children. Therefore, the experience of these working-class children was not meditated, softened, and controlled by the parents. Ritterhouse observed that the working-class black family was hardly to blame for this situation:

[...] they worked long hours at exhausting and ill-paid jobs. Recognizing these realities, some found they could hardly blame working-class families for letting their children grow up on their own. (Ritterhouse, 97)

Both Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright were children who belonged to this category. As opposed to the middle-class “respectable” blacks, who “were a people who could maintain their dignity and self-respect even in the face of oppression” (Ritterhouse, 94), they would be referred to as “niggers”. Their clothes were not clean, their behaviour was not neat enough, their education was poor, their future doomed to poverty and hard work. In another words, they did not call in question that their race was not “naturally inferior” (Ritterhouse, 84) and thus helped the whites retain the Jim Crow system working, having been despised by both whites and middle-class blacks.

Clearly, their state of being was exactly what white majority forced them to be when black and white institutions were kept separate. All that these “niggers” (as they were offended) did was that they accepted the rules of the more powerful and unjust community with non-resistance and ignored the significance of their action for the whole black community. Needless to say, these working-class parents taught their children to conform to the Jim Crow because they wanted them to stay alive. These parents knew that their ability to protect their children was limited by Jim Crow system and thus black children underwent the same experience as the slave children in that they reasonably feared an attack. The words of Steven Mintz concerning slave children are therefore applicable to the Jim Crow period because the impact on children’s mentality remained the same as in the times of slavery: “Among the most severe traumas experienced by slave children was learning that their parents were helpless to protect them from abuse.” (Mintz, 103) For both, slave children and children in Jim Crow period, it was in a power of a higher authority than their parents’ to punish and beat them.

Primary role of parenting is, as it is defined in *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, “the raising of children and all the responsibilities and activities that are involved in it”. (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1026) Needless to say, not only the fulfilling a parental role dutifully but also not doing so affects the life of a child into a great extent, as in Pecola’s and Richard’s case. Ideally, the parent introduces the world to a child step by step, he/she plays the role of a mediator between his/her child and the reality of the world. Children build their relationship to the world based on knowledge and experience,

they need to find their place in the system with the help of their parents who explain and demonstrate.

Where white people fail to recognize the true value of a black personality, or of a black child, the people of the same race, namely the family, should function as a moral support, help; an advocate of their fellow. In cases where family members are capable of encouraging each other, the formation of children's spirit is positively influenced and such individuals are more likely to face the society outside their family. In accordance with this, Vágnerová stated that a family serves as a source of emotional base, security and protection. A strong desire for positive acceptance influences the interpretation of parents' behaviour to a child and other experience. Family modifies child's essential attitude towards the world. It is a major influence for the development of self-respect and self-confidence, both are vital for child's abilities. (2005, 18)

For poor black families and their children, the sense of "security and protection", as Vágnerová named it, was as distant as the racist reality was close because of the society-related powerlessness of blacks, and the absence of black parents (and thus their limited influence on their children's experience). Regarding the parental modification of child's perception of the reality shaping child's sense of the "self", working-class black parents could have acted protectively, but they could not have prevented the child's encounter with this racist reality. Ritterhouse portrayed the effort of parents to shelter their children from racism and its psychological effects because they worried about children's safety under white dominance. (56) Hopeless as they were, the parents were often very strict themselves during their explanations of black and white relations. Ritterhouse called the anxiety that black parents experienced "complex emotions" (139). The anxiety that their children could be beaten (or worse) by whites forced the parents to impose the burden of fear on the children:

As many African Americans' descriptions of Jim Crow-era discipline show, these complex emotions often manifested themselves in a heavy sense of responsibility to impress upon children, with the sting of a peachwood switch if necessary, the importance of staying out of trouble at all costs. (Ritterhouse, 139)

Severe as these actions seemed, they were prove of parental love that found none but hopeless ways of preventing the children from misdemeanour towards white adults or white children. Once black “rascals” felt fear of being punished by whites, the reality of not being protected by their parents, they ceased to play with whites and replaced their affection with fear and anger. Again, Ritterhouse supports this idea: “From an early age, black children knew that they had to be cautious when playing with whites; [...] (Ritterhouse, 164) because they learnt that “generally accepted conventions meant survival, albeit at the price of self-denigration.” (Ritterhouse, 17) On top of the instilled knowledge of one’s inferiority, black children were stripped of their thoughtlessness, they had to concentrate on their every move, they became adult-like and watchful. Richard depicted the moment he fully realised this:

I was tense each moment, trying to anticipate their wishes avoid a curse, and I did not suspect that the tension I had begun to feel that morning would lift itself into the passion of my life. (Wright, 149)

Prior to the analysis of Pecola’s and Richard’s parents’ conception of world and their transmission of the world into their homes and onto their children, it is vital to deal with the motives of every individual of the four parents. Compared to Pecola’s parents, the information concerning Richard’s parents and their past is rather scarce.

To start with, Richard’s father was a night porter by profession, working at night and sleeping in the daytime. He was a bread-winner for his wife and two boys and for the children he represented a higher authority than their mother. For Richard, even at the tiny age of four, his father did not stand for a desirable pattern to follow, i.e. Richard did not idealise him as children of this age usually do. Thus, Richard’s relationship with his father was in dispute with Vágnerová’s words that both parents are children’s role-model of behaviour (319) probably because he was not “the source of safety” (Vágnerová, 2005, 319) Moreover, Richard’s perception of the father figure was as follows: “He was always a stranger to me, always somehow alien and remote” (Wright, 8) and “I never laughed in his presence” (Wright, 8). The presence of the father evoked in Richard the feeling of dread and fear, the feeling of constant guilt of being noisy, playful, childlike. Father’s frequent

beatings lead to Richard's illness and influenza, to delirious states that lasted for days. Likewise, Ritterhouse noted: "Certainly, Wright's own father had often exercised a paternal right to beat him before deserting the family and leaving the job to his wife." (Ritterhouse, 119) Only after his father left the family did Richard realise that his presence also meant food sufficiency. Again, the connection with slave children can be drawn for Richard's hunger was not dissimilar from theirs, for him the Mintz's words concerning slave children were not less valid: "Slave children were severely underfed, and later recalled that they frequently went hungry." (Mintz, 101)

To continue with, Richard's mother was closer to him than in a sense of both physical and psychological presence in early years of his life. After the father desertion, however, she had to work in order to earn money and feed the family, and thus she was forced to leave Richard and his brother unprotected. In addition to a lot of questions that were left unanswered because of his mother's protectiveness, her tiredness and rigidity brought about the suppression of Richard's natural curiosity and interest in the world matters as the following dialogue from *Black Boy* illustrates:

"Did Granny become colored when she married Grandpa?"

"Will you stop asking silly questions!"

"But did she?"

"Granny didn't *become* colored," my mother said angrily. "She was *born* the color she is now."

Again I was being shut out of the secret, the thing, the reality I felt somewhere beneath all the words and silences.

"Why didn't Granny marry a white man?" I asked.

"Because she didn't want to," my mother said peevishly.

"Why don't you want to talk to me?" I asked.

She slapped me and I cried. (Wright, 45-46)

What is worse, the lack of parental presence brought the six-year-old Richard to the saloon where he was exposed to a negative influence of drunk whites, where he learnt to drink and swear, i.e. activities that threatened to damage not only his innocence but also his imagination. The poverty together with the mother's deteriorating health brought them finally to the family of his deeply-religious grandmother, to a place with strict conduct and predominance of women. Approximately at the same time, Richard's mother lost the

influence on her child entirely, from that time on, she was unable to answer his questions and direct his actions any more. In the words of LeSeur:

[...] his mother becomes chronically ill early in his life, so there is always this “helpless” dependent woman who recoils under pressure as well as from the grandmother’s commands and demands. (LeSeur, 94)

The loss of the safety provided by mother and father figures brought Richard to the feeling of uneasiness, of constant reappraisal of his family relations. Instead of the acceptance of his parents, Richard’s experience taught him to doubt and question the behaviour of his relatives, to seek the safety outside home, in the streets, among his peers. It is indisputable that neither the nuclear nor extended family helped him with his self-identification process, i.e. the process that normally proceeds from the identification of oneself with a family relative (most often mother or father) to breaking the bond and individualisation in later stage. Conversely, as he was used to fight for his position, Richard applied this approach also at home, towards his aunt, grandmother and other relatives if it was inevitable. While neither of his relatives satisfied his desire for a role-model, Richard resisted them, being exceptional both for his stiffness and independence. In the words of Ralph Ellison: “[...] the child turns not to the father to compensate if he feels mother-rejection, but to the grandmother, or to an aunt—and Wright rejected both of these.” (Ellison) In addition to Ellison’s claim, the fact that there was no father and its implications will be discussed further in the chapter “Gender and Sexuality”.

Similarly to Richard, Pecola also missed the role-models to follow as both of her parents were stigmatized by the society and their stigma was passed on their children. Let alone their violent nature, the anger Pecola’s parents vented on their children was not provoked by the children themselves. The intensity of this emotion was growing for years and it was first introduced to them when they were very young. To start with, Cholly’s anger originated in his first sexual experience. At the time of his youth and vulnerability, he lost his aunt, the only relative. At her funeral he met a girl, Darlene, with whom he experienced his first sexual encounter. When they were absorbed in discovering their bodies, two white men surprised and interrupted them. To a great shock of both young

people, the whites wanted them to continue, watching. This was a breakpoint for Cholly's development.

With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers and underwear.

"Hee hee hee hee heeeeee."

Darlene put her hands over her face as Cholly began to simulate what had gone on before. He could do no more than make-believe. The flashlight made a mood on his behind. (Morrison, 116)

What becomes evident later in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly's natural reaction to humiliation and impotence was goal-directed aggression not towards the perpetrator in relation to whom he was powerless, but towards a weaker individual, towards Darlene, other women, his wife. When Pauline started to fight back and became the more dominant one in the household, Cholly found his revenge in abusing his daughter. In his pointless effort to mask his vulnerability, he became the perpetrator, the evil. Not surprisingly, Cholly was fascinated by the idea that he became close to the image of the devil: "He never felt anything thinking about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him." (Morrison, 105)

Cholly, who had been rejected by both of his parents and missed the role-model of a father in a functioning family, was therefore unable to perform such a role himself. Pecola, disgusted by his nakedness, called him just "Choly" and not "Father". He sought reconciliation in alcohol and his amoral nature allowed him to confuse parental love with physical passion. He raped Pecola and then he was unable to resolve whether he loved Pecola, the daughter, or hated Pecola, the woman who reminded him of his impotence. According to the critic Napieralski, Cholly's dispute was all but surprising: "Cholly's virtual denial of his relationship to his daughter in his rape of Pecola becomes understandable – though certainly not excusable – against this background." (Napieralski, 59-60)

While Cholly abused Pecola's body, Pauline abused her mind thoroughly. When she found her daughter lying unconscious on the floor, Pauline directed her anger towards her

and beat her seemingly for being raped. The true reason, however, was hidden in Pauline's past.

By the time of Pecola's birth, Pauline's life had been ruined, she had long forgotten the dreams and fantasies she once had about love. For her, the Breedlove's family was an everyday reminder of her failure. Working as a servant for a white family, Pauline was attracted by the life of her employers, by their white, clean house that was similar to the ones she admired in the movies. Her own family stood for the dark and dirty part of her life, the part she wanted to be stripped of. For her, the nature of things was the apparent, not the hidden. In result, the frustration replaced affection for her children:

In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, [...] (Morrison, 95)

The luxuries displayed in white households and the beauty of actors and actresses were mocking Pauline's own poverty and blackness. In the same moment she lost her tooth in the cinema when she was pregnant, she also lost her hopes for better future. The process of gradual disappointment from her life with Cholly was at that moment completed. The cause and its effect was depicted in *The Bluest Eye*:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. (Morrison, 95)

In the aftermath of losing her tooth, she was no longer in control of her violent reactions towards her children. Being ashamed of her own identity, Pauline transfers the feeling of inferiority and shame onto her daughter: "Into her daughter she beat fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (Morrison, 100) Moreover, she also ordered Pecola to call her Mrs. Breedlove instead of mother, while the daughter of her white employees was allowed to call her "Polly" and thus the imbalance between the hate and

love she manifested at home and at work made Pecola feel that she was not for some reason worth her mother's love. Logically, at least according to Pecola's immature mind, the reason was her appearance, her blackness, and presumed ugliness. In her innocence and vulnerability, Pecola tormented herself by acceptance of her mother's absurd values.

Surveys have shown that child abuse causes a negative self-perception and low self-esteem which does not heal as children grow up. They often accept the humiliation automatically as they strongly believe in their own inferiority. They accept the attitude of an abusing parent which above all expresses that they are wrong, undesirable and contemptible. Not only do children accept this view in the early school age, but they also do not think about other possibilities as their experience is quite limited. What is more, by the time of their teenage years, the emotional experience with inferiority complex is so deep that it is beyond their ability to change it and, as a result, it has a negative influence on the overall development of a personality. (Vágnerová, 1997, 107)

What causes more serious harm to the personality development of a child – whether an absent parent or a violating one – is difficult to determine. The fact is that while Richard succeeded in maintaining his sanity, Pecola did not. Both of them developed strategies of facing the shame, hunger (both physical and psychological), and fear – Richard sought to escape from the South, Pecola sought to escape from the reality. The cause of their struggle, however, was the same, i.e. the society in the Jim Crow South, personified by their parents. The effect of the experience was, because of the complexity of one's character, unpredictable. Due to the influence of Pecola's and Richard's parents, neither of the two childhoods was a happy and contented one. Instead of parental interest, support, and advice, Pecola and Richard got scorn, violence, indifference, and revulsion.

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

4. Gender and Sexuality

In the forthcoming chapter, a close relationship is discussed between the terms “sex” and “gender”. While the term “sex” is understood as a collection of biologically given features that also affect a mentality of an individual, the term “gender” is socially and culturally built phenomenon that defines the role of men and women. Male and female gender roles (as they are generally perceived) differ, but in this paper they are not considered as opposite terms – they are merely different, not contradictory, and thus they can at times mingle. Similarly to the racial role of an individual, gender role is acquired. Vágnerová, a psychologist, claims that the acceptance of gender, defined as social expectation, is rewarded and vice versa. (2005, 167) Every individual who conforms, accepting his/her role in order to fit in the society, reinforces the system based on prejudice. Ritterhouse documented that the system often resulted in a real threat: “Responding to cultural stereotypes as well as manifest dangers, black parents worried about girls’ sexuality far more than boys’.” (Ritterhouse, 89) Furthermore, according to Ritterhouse, not only girls were in danger: “Just as they feared that girls might be sexually assaulted, they feared that boys might be arrested, beaten, or worse and that they would be unable to do anything about it.” (Ritterhouse, 89)

Taking into account the self-perception of Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright, the gender issue, tightly interwoven with their race, played an important role in their mentality formation and the process of maturation. Both Pecola and Richard were under the influence of their parents who, regardless of their intentions, imposed the gender roles on their children and in so doing, prevented their true self-discovery. In the words of Ritterhouse: “Sexually, as well as racially, the Jim Crow South was a complicated world for black adolescents to grow into.” (Ritterhouse, 204)

One of the gender-related stereotypes is the assumption that women are naturally passive, domestically oriented while men are active explorers, seeking adventure. In the opinion of Vágnerová based on the study of Steinberg and Belsky, the difference in behaviour of boys and girls stems from the interaction of biological and social influences, to be more precise, the biological aspect is socially developed. (2005, 231) Following this

logic, Pecola's typically passive and submissive behaviour as well as Richard's assertion and occasional aggression stems from the socially stimulated gender role. From all social influences on a child, the role of nuclear family is decisive and indisputable. Therefore, with respect to an individuality of every child and every parent, differences arise between representatives of the same gender. Hence the difference exists between attitudes of individual girls and boys. The extract that Greta LeSeur analysed serves as evidence of such individual difference. Claudia, the narrator in *The Bluest Eye*, felt distressed when she observed Pecola's behaviour after Maureen Peal's affront:

Pecola's reaction to Maureen's insults upsets Claudia. She thinks that her friend should stand up against the insults and not wilt. Thus, the difference in character between Claudia and Pecola is illustrated in Claudia's frustration with her friend's passivity. (LeSeur, 127)

With reference to the above extract, the role of gender must not be over-generalised, the significance of individualisation and family relations must be taken into account. Certainly, the gender roles observable in Pecola's and Richard's behaviour retain various forms and distinctiveness. In Pecola's case, the fact that she was an abused child must be considered together with her gender role. A great deal of her passivity, associated mainly with female gender, was evoked by her victimization, it was only one of possible responses of a victim to a repeated violence in situation where the violating people were her parents. Compared to her female peers, Pecola was far more self-conscious and fearful and her parents were to blame. Ritterhouse described an observation that: "Black women [were] somewhat more willing to admit to having been intimidated, but girls often describe fighting back as well." (Ritterhouse, 170) In addition to this, the fact that girls who were able to fight back were largely encouraged and lead by their mothers must be referenced.

For a natural development of a child, the identification with a parent of the same gender is vital, i.e. the parent represents a pattern to follow. With reference to Vágnerová, a parent of the same sex represents an important gender role-model, a close connection to this parent and imitation of this parent strengthens one's self-esteem, while the other parent plays an important complementary role. (2005, 232) Having in mind that each of the

parents are discussed in a greater detail in the chapter called “The Role of Parents”, it can be summarised that Pecola’s mother (or Mrs. Breedlove as Pecola had to call her) was emotionally apathetic, while her father, Cholly, was an amoral, abusing figure. Richard’s father, on the other hand, was an absent one, and his mother was struggling with her own health problems, she was exhausted and unable to cope with her children’s demands. LeSeur pointed out that unlike the other parents, only Richard’s mother still played an irreversible, positive role in her child’s life:

Richard’s mother, like all the mothers in these novels, is not a “strong” woman in the sense of the ironlike Black matriarchal figures, but her presence and closeness to him are expressed throughout his life. (LeSeur, 94)

Richard did not identify with his father as he left the family for another woman, leaving behind a hopeless, penniless wife and two little children. As a result of his father’s action, Richard had to spend some time in an orphanage. Later on, due to his mother’s illness, he was forced to adopt a responsible male role and earn a living for the family. In the words of Ritterhouse:

With an absent father, a sick mother, and a generally unsympathetic extended family, Wright was even more desperate to earn money than most African American children. (Ritterhouse, 189)

In the course of his boyhood, Richard did not find any charismatic male figure, anyone with whom he could identify. The absence of his father influenced Richard sorely, his “not-being-there” was intense. Although he was not fully conscious of the entire impact of the missing father on his psyche, Richard felt strong, incomprehensible emotion whenever he pictured the last moment he saw him as a child:

We left. I had the feeling that I had had to do with something unclean. Many times in the years after that the image of my father and the strange woman, their faces lit by the dancing flames, would surge up in my imagination so vivid and strong that I felt I could reach out and touch it; I would stare at it,

feeling that it possessed some vital meaning which always eluded me.
(Wright, 32)

Needless to say, Pecola knew Richard's feeling of being rejected, unwelcome to one's own parent, the feeling that the parent chose somebody else for his/her love and affection. Such a feeling does imprint into one's mind as a painful, burning, forever present sign. For a child, if one is not worth the attention of his/her parents, he/she is not important for anyone. This logic, at least, was the one Pecola Breedlove followed, detested by her mother, and abused by her father. Being the one not-deserving love, ugly, unwanted (as she strongly believed), Pecola used various methods of coping with difficult situations that she had to face and that made her feel sick – from her intensive wish that her parents would kill each other to another “profound wish that she herself could die.” (Morrison, 32) In her situation, still dependent on her parents and with nobody who was able and willing to help, Pecola was unable to find a real solution to her problem, she was doomed to failure.

One aspect related to gender roles worried girls in general, and Pecola in particular, far more than boys – the question of one's beauty. Pecola was forced to believe in her ugliness, Pauline initiated the teaching about Pecola's inferiority and ugliness soon after the childbirth. In the course of time, her initial affection to her only daughter ceased and disdain replaced it:

I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly. (Morrison, 97-98)

Despite Mrs. Breedlove's hostile behaviour to her daughter, Pecola accepted beauty as the only valid value, and judged the world according to this value. As a result of accepting the rules of her oppressors, Pecola did not fail to hate herself instead of hating Shirley Temple and other icons that dictated the “little white princess” beauty-code Pauline so endlessly admired. With the acceptance of the generally accepted beauty-code, she deprived herself of the privilege to refuse what she could not have and value what she had. With the acceptance, she lost the power to protect herself and thus she fell into passivity,

even rigidity. Vágnerová claims that emotionally deprived children are apathetic, sullen, and distrustful. (1997, 101)

Considering her life experience, the fact that Pecola blamed herself for her personal tragedies was not without logic – she observed that bad things happen to her only, not to beautiful children like Maureen Peal, whose complexion had a lighter shade of black, while Pecola’s complexion was dark black. It was not only Pecola’s feeling but judgment based on the observable behaviour of others that brought her to her final conclusion – that her eyes together with her skin colour were causes of nasty behaviour of her parents and classmates, that she was inferior. Claudia, the narrator, also noticed the change in boys’ behaviour when they saw beautiful, light-skinned Maureen Peal:

Maureen appeared at my elbow, and the boys seemed reluctant to continue under her springtime eyes so wide with interest. They buckled in confusion, not willing to beat up three girls under her watchful gaze. So they listened to a budding male instinct that told them to pretend we were unworthy of their attention.

“Come on, man.”

“Yeah. Come on. We ain’t got time to fool with them.” (Morrison, 51)

For compensation of what they did not find at home, i.e. the feeling of companionship and shelter, Pecola and Richard turned outside of their homes. In this aspect, the difference of their gender roles was the most evident due to the nature of companionship each of them sought. The identification with others, the possibility to share one’s worries would serve as a medicine for their wounded psyche. Vágnerová explains the need for socialising as differentiation of a group from another group, based on similarity of group members. Competition between groups strengthens the solidarity between the group members. That is why aggression aimed at others is supported – a common enemy reduces conflicts within a group and makes it more cohesive. (2005, 299) Richard naturally longed for companionship and so he joined a group of older boys, accepting their code of conduct with ease:

I now associated with older boys and I had to pay for my admittance into their company by subscribing to certain racial sentiments. The touchstone of fraternity was my feeling toward white people, how much hostility I held

toward them, what degrees of value and honour I assigned to race. None of this was premeditated, but sprang spontaneously out of the talk of black boys who met at the crossroads. (Wright, 76)

For Pecola, the only friends who did not take any advantage of her were three older prostitutes – China, Poland and Miss Marie. She did not associate with her peers because such encounters meant pain and humiliation. For Pecola, the prostitutes substituted her whole family – she felt that they did not despise her, they talked to her as if she was equal (a unique experience for Pecola). The notion that she herself would become a prostitute did not occur to her, yet nobody forbade her to do so:

With Pecola, they were as free as they were with each other. Marie concocted stories for her because she was a child, but the stories were breezy and rough. If Pecola had announced her intention to live the life they did, they would not have tried to dissuade her or voiced any alarm. (Morrison, 43)

The presence of prostitutes, it seems, was no less usual for Richard and his childhood. At the age of nine, provoked by a girl, he peeped into an adjacent flat and “[he] saw, in the dim shadows of the room beyond, a naked man and a naked woman upon a bed, the man on top of the woman.” (Wright, 61) When his mother realized this, she refused to beat Richard for spying as the landlady asked her, but insisted on moving away from the place instead.

Considering the question of Pecola’s and Richard’s sexuality, their first encounters with sex matters need to be discussed. Unlike Richard, Pecola was an unintentional witness of sex relations between her parents due to the pitiful storefront they all inhabited. In her love considerations, her naïve and childlike logic is reflected, while the roughness of the whole situation remains obvious:

How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together? Into her eyes came the picture of Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove in bed. He making sounds as though he were in pain, as though something had him by the throat wouldn’t let go. Terrible as his noises were, they were not nearly as bad as the no noise at all from her mother. It was as though she was not even there. Maybe that was love. Choking sounds and silence. (Morrison, 44)

Needless to say, the first Pecola's passive encounters with sex scenes did not set a positive background for a healthy development of her sexuality and identity, even though Pauline in her description of sex with Cholly explains: "I don't make no noise, because the chil'ren might hear." (Morrison, 101) As Ritterhouse noted in the same sense, distinguishing clearly between the sexuality of adults and children:

The fact that black children were often exposed to sex in various forms at an early age, especially in the cramped living quarters and rougher neighbourhoods of the working classes, did not necessarily mean that they were sexually precocious, much less self-confident. (Ritterhouse, 193)

Far more fatal than her parents' sounds was for Pecola the moment her father raped her. At that moment, he decided that she would never ask again "What did love feel like?" (Morrison, 44) From then on, she was stigmatized by his cruel deed and with her tragedy she was let alone. Once again, the cause of Cholly's ruined character and its relation to Pecola's fate should be stressed, the fact that the repeated rape was in fact related to Cholly's childhood. Accordingly, Pin-chia Feng pointed out: "By writing about a shockingly 'immoral' story of incest in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison interrogates the racial factors behind the tragedy." (Pin-chia Feng, 39) To add insult to injury, Pauline beat Pecola and thus demonstrated total emotional insufficiency, inhumane and fiendish relationship to her only daughter. In effect, Pecola, a twelve-year-old girl, did not get a chance to recover from the shock, pain, and the loss of remaining ideals because her family betrayed her. As she was not able to bear the trauma, Pecola escaped to unreal worlds where she had everything she missed in reality – there she found a friend, blue eyes, and relief. The fact that the neighbours remained indifferent and even blamed Pecola for provoking behaviour towards her father only highlights how difficult and hopeless was the situation for the victim:

"Well, they ought to take her out of school."

"Ought to. She carry some of the blame."

"Oh, come on. She ain't but twelve or so."

"Yeah. But you never know. How come she didn't fight him?" (Morrison, 149)

In addition to the vicious act of Pecola's abuse by her father, the reaction of her mother and the fact that the incestuous behaviour was well-known by the whole community and nobody did anything to help her, all these aspects precipitated Pecola's isolation in the society and her identity-crisis. Pecola's passivity and inability to "fight him" (Morrison, 149) provoked Cholly's further aggression that served him as an instrument of power. In the opinion of Voňková, an expert on domestic forms of violence, the relationship between gender and the potential to become a victim exists, i.e. the number of female victims is higher than the number of male victims. (Voňková, 74)

Richard's sexual intimidation and threat was connected to his exposure to white surroundings while he worked. As opposed to Pecola's premature sexual initiation, Richard struggled with the race-related ignorance of his sexuality. Years later, Richard found work as a bellboy and one of his tasks was to serve white prostitutes. In so doing, he saw many of them naked but he was not permitted to show any emotion, not even interest, otherwise he exposed himself to the danger of being killed for "violating the white womanhood", another extreme of the Jim Crow South. The situation is in *Black Boy* depicted as follows:

[...] I grew used to seeing the white prostitutes naked upon their beds, sitting nude about their rooms, and I learned new modes of behavior, new rules in how to live the Jim Crow life. It was presumed that we black boys took their nakedness for granted, that it startled us no more than a blue vase or a red rug. Our presence awoke in them no sense of shame whatever, for we blacks were not considered human anyway. (Wright, 204)

Regarding the unwritten rules of sexual behaviour between blacks and whites, these were, similarly to all other aspects of the Jim Crow South, dictated by whites and their needs. While black men were lynched for presupposed sexual acts towards white women, open, lascivious behaviour of white men towards black women, who disposed of no means of protection, was on the opposite side of the imaginary scale. Ritterhouse explained the presumption of whites based on their limited knowledge of blacks: "[...] growing up in the Jim Crow South meant confronting white stereotypes of black men as generously endowed and sexually aggressive, if not predatory and bestial." (Ritterhouse, 193), as opposed to the

victimization of black women: “[...] number of black families felt that the only way to protect their girls from white sexual abuse was to keep them out of household work in the first place.” (Ritterhouse, 198) The more blacks were in contact with whites due to their work and duties, the more they were jeopardized. Ritterhouse documented the premature initiation of blacks caused by prejudice and indifference of whites:

Working for wages also exposed young blacks to a wider variety of interactions with whites and, for many, resulted in their being treated as either sexually available or sexually dangerous, in accordance with white views of black female and male sexuality, for the first time. (Ritterhouse, 182)

To sum up, the gender issue was closely related to the race one, building a hierarchy of the more and less privileged individuals. Pecola and Richard lived in the society where a black child had no rights, where poor black children were commonly neglected and abused, by whites in a better case. Pin-chia Feng, who described the situation of female Bildungsroman, worked with the term “multiple oppression based on their racial, gender and class backgrounds.” (Pin-chia Feng, 40) Using this terminology, poor black children, boys and girls, Richards and Pecolas, endured this “multiple oppression” because in the hierarchy created by the society of Jim Crow era they were the least ones. Learning their gender roles skilfully, Richard and Pecola found ways of escape accessible to them. Richard escaped literally from the South to the North, Pecola escaped on a more abstract level, from the unbearable reality to her dream.

5. God and Religion

Religion and Christianity was by black people in the American South perceived as a hope for better life that would come after the death. While they believed that the suffering was only temporary, they were willing to endure more oppression than they would in case there had been no such hope. In their tragedies they saw the trial and when overcoming them they expected redemption after their death. The fact that Christian tradition was originally adopted from whites and that the African ancestors were hesitant to accept this religion as the words of Franklin and Moss document was at the beginning of the 20th century long forgotten:

It was a strange religion, this Christianity, which taught equality and brotherhood and at the same time introduced on a large scale the practice of tearing people from their homes and transporting them to a distant land to become slaves. If the Africans south of the Sahara were slow to accept Christianity, it was not only because they were attached to their particular forms of tribal worship but also because they did not have the superhuman capacity to reconcile in their own minds the contradictory character of the new religion. (Franklin, Moss, 22)

In fact, in the act of acceptance of Christianity, blacks forgot another strap that would remind them of their worth, of who they really were. The role of the church was a double-edged sword – on one hand, it became the centre of the black community, its unifying role was indisputable, on the other hand, in the unity the voice of an individual was always silenced. Clearly, people who did not share the religious view of life invested more energy into the life they lived. Moreover, they were not afraid of the holy punishment and thus became more problematic in terms of black and white relations, only they were disapproved of by whites and blacks alike. As the critic Joseph T. Skerrett made clear, applying Ralph Ellison's theory, one of the ways of coping with the Jim Crow system was to find a substitute for life in religion and those of a different opinion were irreversibly lost in the eyes of black religious community:

One could retreat into religion, as Wright's family to a great degree did, and resign oneself to the way things were in this world. Seeing the racial situation *sub specie aeternitas*, one would then await justice beyond the grave and believe that those who came into open conflict with the whites were evil people, predestined for failure and punishment. (Skerrett, 89)

The first reason why Richard Wright's attitude towards religion was problematical was that he associated religion with a tool, an instrument, designed by whites in order to keep the black community inactive in the topical social matters. Wright's family was deeply religious and tried to impose the principles of Christianity upon Richard, but all their attempts to do so failed, facing Richard's stubborn presumption that he needed neither God nor the painful, tiring rituals connected to His worshipping. Thanks to his grandmother, an active member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, Richard was not only starving, but he was also physically tortured by endless hours he had to spend in prayers. In addition to his tough daily routine, he was not allowed to earn a little money as other children did because the only work was available on Saturdays, the days of the Sabbath. Richard's insistence on grandmother's permission to work on Saturdays climaxed when Richard threatened her to leave the house. At the moment she gave up her religious believes directed at Richard and finally understood she was powerless in implanting religion in Richard's mind: "'All right,' she said. 'If you want to go to hell, then go. But God'll know that it was not my fault. He'll forgive me, but He won't forgive you.'" (Wright, 144) From that moment on, Richard did not truly exist for both his grandmother and his aunt Addie. Surprisingly, his mother did not reject him in the same manner, on the contrary, she embraced his ability to stand for his rights, a great and rare consolation to Richard: "She rose and hobbled to me on her paralytic legs and kissed me." (Wright, 144) The words of Skerrett, the critic, disclosed that living in the grandmother's house was similarly uneasy for Richard's mother and thus in this matter Richard might have expected companionship:

While Richard lived with his mother and younger brother in his grandmother's household, they all struggled against her puritanical Seventh Day Adventist religiosity. Grandmother Wilson's daily prayer routines, "her fiat that day began at sunrise and that night commenced at sundown," the

lengthy Bible readings, the observance of the Holy Sabbath on Saturday (so that Richard could not work for pocket money like other kids), all produced tension, bickering and recrimination. (Scerrett, 52)

The second reason why was Richard unable to accept religion easily was the fact that again it was thrust upon him as an authority, as a must. Obviously, Richard disregarded any authority and he did the same with religion. In the opinion of Singh, “Wright clearly rejected orthodox Christianity; at his baptism, he informs us, he wanted to yell at the preacher to stop the non-sensical ceremony.” (Singh, 99) His self-confidence and identity was formed as a result of the process of constant and unyielding opposition towards the values dictated by the stronger ones, and religious pressures were in this sense no exception. In the words of Hakutani, an expert: “The most painful stance he took in this struggle to be an intense individualist; he created selfhood and exerted his will at the risk of annihilation.” (Hakutani, 74) While his mother supported him in his opposition towards the grandmother, she still demanded that he belong to some religious institution: “Though Granny was angry and disgusted, my mother began to attend a Methodist church in the neighborhood,” (Wright, 151) Richard was strong enough to oppose his grandmother, but to his mother he surrendered and, to his horror, underwent the ritual of baptism, feeling that his freedom of mind was violated:

This business of saving souls had no ethics; every human relationship was shamelessly exploited. In essence, the tribe was asking us whether we shared its feelings; if we refused to join the church, it was equivalent to saying no, to placing ourselves in the position of moral monsters. (Wright, 154)

In the act of his baptism, Richard’s relation to God was only a minor point, the stress was put on the family bonds and his will to conform to the wish of the others, namely his mother. In case he had refused, he would have had irreversibly damaged his relation to his mother, the only personal relation that remained to Richard after his father’s desertion, his grandmother’s renunciation, and his peers’ alienation. The question was how much he was willing to endure for the sake of this relationship, whether he was willing to sacrifice his individuality, and pretend, as the others did, that his relation to God was strong and

unalterable. Skerrett explained why Richard's baptism was so vital in the context of his family and community: "Thus the kind of rebellion that Wright's attitudes embodied seemed criminal, 'sinful' –and, ultimately, dangerous to the safety of the entire community." (Skerrett, 90) In another words, for reassurance of its own power, the community needed all its members to share its views.

Richard was baptised, still he did not share the community's view of God, religion and attitude to life. For him, life was a struggle for better future, not reconciliation with unbearable and painful existence. The reason why whites allowed blacks to group in religious ceremonies was precisely the same Richard fought these – the fact that in so doing, blacks' sense of individuality was blindfolded. Strangely, Richard perceived religion in the similar terms as sex matters – for him, both served for exploitation and violation of an individual. Thus, Richard pictured his sexually driven desires for the elder's wife as monstrous, using the language of sermons and the image of a devil:

If my desires had been converted into a concrete religious symbol, the symbol would have looked something like this: a black imp with two horns; a long, curving, forked tail; cloven hoofs, a scaly, naked body; wet, sticky fingers; moist, sensual lips; and lascivious eyes feasting upon the face of the elder's wife... (Wright, 111)

Richard was not ashamed of these desires, the devil's image was nourished by his fear that they could have been used against him similarly to the religious believes that he was forced to have. Therefore, the religion-related manipulation with an individual could have been pictured in the same manner. Noticeably, the widespread support of religious ceremonies together with generally approved of discussion of sex matters originated in white dominance and its approval of these issues. Hakutani argued that "Sex and religion were the most accepted subjects, for they were the topics that did not require positive knowledge or self-assertion on the part of the black man." (Hakutani, 72) Needless to say, the acceptance of these topics on the part of the black community meant also the acceptance of the white superiority. Again, Hakutani noted that: "[...] religion had trapped the minds and hearts of black people." (Hakutani, 73)

Last but not least reason why Richard could not accept the religion in the sense as it was understood by his family and community was the fact that he did not truly feel the presence of God and needed some prove of His existence. Many of his peers were brainwashed and did not understand this Richard's point, they regarded his arguments as the words of blasphemy. Richard did not need religion to fill in his heart as the others did because, having been shaped by the rough and tough rules of the streets, his self-image already proceeded a different direction and Richard was neither willing nor able to alter it. What appalled the community the most was Richard's lack of respect when he spoke about God, the lack that only mirrored the unpretentious attitude he had adopted. The following dialogue between Richard and one of his classmates clearly illustrates this point:

'Oh, Richard, brother, you are lost in the darkness of the world. You must let the church help you.'

'I tell you, I'm all right.'

'Come into the house and let me pray for you.'

'I don't want to hurt your feelings...'

'You can't. I'm talking for God.'

'I don't want to hurt God's feelings either,' I said, the words slipping irreverently from my lips before I was aware of their full meaning.

He was shocked. He wiped tears from his eyes. I was sorry. (Wright, 113)

To summarise Richard's understanding of God, religion and worldly matters, his perception of God was the one of uncertain, shadowy entity, the existence of which was rather uncertain. Matters directly connected to his life's experience were of much greater importance for him. An expert Allen Alexander claimed that "African religions tend to understand tragedy as something that happens regardless of what humans have or have not done." (Alexander, 296) In accordance with these words, Richard's exclamation: "If laying down my life could stop the suffering in the world, I'd do it. But I don't believe anything can stop it, [...]" (Wright, 114) can be interpreted as his return to this old African traditional view of religion. Moreover, it shows that while the existence of God in Richard's eyes was doubtful, the existence of the evil (proved by the existence of suffering in the world and Richard's own experience with the suffering) was certain.

As opposed to Richard's self-assurance, Pecola's self-hatred helped the others, and mainly Mrs. Breedlove, in implanting the false views of life into her mind. While her innate disposition for neurosis and mental imbalance (inherited from Cholly whose mother went insane after Cholly's birth) constantly threatened her sanity, her mother's actions provoked this sleeping danger in multiple ways, including the religious beliefs that were used as a tool against her daughter. Mrs. Breedlove's understanding of religion was in dispute with the principles of humanity. She used her religion in a way Richard Wright understood it, i.e. as a weapon against her daughter and family, in her martyrdom she found the source of her ability not to feel any kindness, respect, or sympathy towards other people. An extract from *The Bluest Eye* depicts her "beloved" grudge that was fed by imperfections of her relatives:

If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. (Morrison, 31)

Pecola's mother was the one who not only imprinted the white standards, including religion, into Pecola's mind, but she also made sure Pecola would respect these standards as the ultimate, indisputable ones, that she would measure her value in accordance with them. For a child of Pecola's age, an objective judgment of the standards was absolutely excluded, since the "tuition" was initiated at the moment of her birth and thus she was forced to get familiarised with the values, they became as certain as the existence of God. The obvious discrepancy between the values that Pecola was forced to acclaim and those that were natural for her lead to confusion and depressive states from the feeling of her insufficiency. As the critic Alexander stated, Pauline played the "central role in the psychological disintegration of Pecola". (Alexander, 295)

Pecola's gullible character did not question Pauline's statements in the way typical for Richard. Moreover, God's presence was for her the only hope she was able to retain in the world where she was deserted by everybody. Therefore, her ambition of having blue eyes that would help her to change her reality was revealed to God, though He remained

indifferent to her pleading. Sadly, this unmoved entity was the only Pecola's companion, present but unresponsive in Pecola's tragedy, the observer whose image was close to her but whose help was unattainable:

Pecola turned to find the front door and saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face. (Morrison, 72)

Pecola was sacrificed by the society who adopted the system of "either-or" values, nobody was interested in the faith of a little troubled girl, nobody had sympathy and understanding for her, not even her God. Thus, after the failure of her prayers for the blue eyes that would alter all her suffering, her attempts to disappear from the world became understandable: "She held her head down against the cold. But she could not hold it low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement." (Morrison, 72) In the opinion of Pin-chia Feng, Pecola's growth was discontinued "because of her unconditional internalization of the dominant ideology." (Pin-chia Feng, 52) The society, the community, and her family were the cause of her insanity, and, appallingly, in the open denial of their guilt they then despised the insane. They averted their looks from her as the dialogue between Pecola and her second "self", her secret friend who is "right after [her] eyes" (Morrison, 154), clearly illustrates, and that proves that even in her insanity Pecola felt offended:

Why don't you look at me when you say that? You're looking drop-eyed like Mrs. Breedlove.
Mrs. Breedlove look drop-eyed at you?
Yes. Now she does. Ever since I got my blue eyes, she look away from me all of the time. Do you suppose she's jealous too?
Could be. They are pretty, you know.
I know. He really did a good job. Everybody's jealous. Every time I look at somebody, they look off. (Morrison, 154)

Pecola's long deferred fulfilment of her intense wish to become a blue-eyed girl was the climax of the long-term process of losing the notion of her identity, the process initiated by Pauline Breedlove, fed by self-hatred, and completed by Soaphead Church, a

misanthrope who presented himself “as the instrument through which [the Lord] works” (Morrison, 138). To Soaphead Church’s distorted mind, Pecola seemed as a scapegoat, he used and abused her in order to revenge himself on God whom he blamed for his deviations and life misfortunes. He did not hesitate to blame God for Pecola’s sudden emergence and for temptation that stemmed from Soaphead’s deviation. As mitigation in his letter to God, Soaphead recounted the key moments in his life, naming Pecola’s appearance as the last one:

Tell me, Lord, how could you leave a lass so long so lone that she could find her way to me? How could you? I weep for you, Lord. And it is because I weep for You that I had to do your work for You. (Morrison, 143)

As can be concluded from his letter to God, Soaphead Church abused Pecola’s innocence shamelessly to serve his own purpose, he used her in order to relieve himself from his presumed injustices, all the hate that had accumulated in him in the course of years (tough childhood, unhappy marriage, sexual orientation to little girls) was directed and thrown upon her head. He triumphed over God’s seeming negligence and felt deeply satisfied with his action, what is more, Soaphead felt remorselessly equal of God. In his letter, he disclosed how sweet a triumph it was for him, what a relieve it brought to him at a cost of Pecola’s sanity:

Having therefore inhibited, as it were, of the nectar, I am not afraid of You, of Death, not even of Life, and it’s all right about Velma; and it’s all right about Papa; and it’s all right about the Greater and the Lesser Antilles. Quite all right. Quite. (Morrison, 144)

Pecola’s escape into madness was not the worst tragedy that happened to her – it was merely her reaction to traumatic experience that she had to endure and that was too painful for a vulnerable soul of 12 years old black girl. For the sake of not losing the safety that should have been provided by Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly, Pecola could not blame them for their violent and unjustifiable behaviour, she instead convinced herself that she had been a bad girl and therefore mother’s and father’s behaviour was rightful. However threatening

this explanation was to her soul, still it meant certain safety. According to Vágnerová, the potential danger of being deserted by parents is often worse than the physical pain. (1997, 106) Following Vágnerová's reasoning hereafter, Pecola thus had to resolve the conflict between the need to dispose of the maltreatment and at the same time retain the illusion of safety. (1997, 106) The explanation of parents' rightful punishment of their worthless daughter was for her the most logical and feasible.

Nevertheless, the punishment that came upon the head of an innocent dog after she gave the poisoned food to it was beyond any of Pecola's explanations. Her deliberately built set of values collapsed, the status of righteous punishment was irreversibly lost when she witnessed the slow and cruel death of the dog, the creature that by no means deserved it. The unspeakable shock from the dog's death together with Soaphead's manipulation and Pecola's unswerving faith, i.e. too many contrasting beliefs in one mind, precipitated her insanity. The crucial, decisive moment is in *The Bluest Eye* pictured in Pecola's hopeless gesture:

She made a wild, pointless gesture with one hand and then covered her mouth with both hands. She was trying not to vomit. The dog fell again, a spasm jerking his body. Then he was quiet. The girl's hands covering her mouth, she backed away a few feet, then turned, ran out of the yard and down the walk. (Morrison, 140)

Pecola's run symbolised her escape from the pain, guilt, shame, sickness, and anguish into the more pleasant world with a friend and blue eyes, into an impenetrable world where she was safe because people were afraid to touch her sacred insanity, to look at her and thus hurt her. Pecola's madness was not a solution to her troubles related to the real world, but in her madness she found the relief. Paradoxically, the way out lead through further suffering, and the person who helped to find her this way was, at least according to Singh's theory, a devil: "[...] with the absence of God, man must play His role, but all God-like action, when carried to extremes, become ungodly, demonic, and tragic." (102-103)

All things considered, the existence of evil in both novels discussed is certain, the black community decided to live in harmony with it and worshipped God at the same time. Pecola's faith and Richard's lack of faith played the vital role in their different reactions to

human's actions in the name of God, and lead, using the language of a metaphor, to Pecola's damnation and Richard's salvation.

6. Identity

As far as the identity and self-confidence of Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright is concerned, the process of their formation had at least two major stages. While the first stage of children's self-confidence relied heavily on the experience with parents, i.e. what was approved and disapproved, the second (not less important) stage depended on the interaction with the peers and it could either confirm the conclusion about one's qualities, or alter the so far established conception of the "self".

Living with Mrs. Breedlove, Cholly, and her brother Sammy, Pecola often had to witness the fights between her parents. They did not necessarily have to involve her into the fight physically, and still they wounded her, deformed her perception of the world. The heaviest impact on her psyche is hidden in her belief that "If [I] looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too." (Morrison, 34) In her naïve statement, Pecola demonstrated the guilt she carried for everything that happened in Breedlove's household, the blame for the ugliness and dirtiness of their existence. Such guilt represented a heavy burden for the child, still it was not possible to remove it because its origin had no reasonable source, Pecola carried it voluntarily in the same manner in which she wore her ugliness, or rather hid behind her ugliness: "And Pecola. She hid behind hers. Concealed, veiled, eclipsed—peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask." (Morrison, 29)

Compared to Richard, who was only beaten when he did something wrong, Pecola did not have to do anything for being beaten and scolded. In result, she was paralysed and unable to move, to act – the quality that provoked others, i.e. parents and later at school also peers, they desired to test how much she was willing to endure. In another words, the performance of any action that was required from her meant for Pecola conditioned fear, even panic, from failure in that action. The strong emotion, the fear of failure, paralysed her (and in the end she really failed). The dynamic process of repeated failures which served as a source of Pecola's self-definition was originally initiated by Pauline; Pecola then adopted the oppressor's idea of her uselessness and did everything and anything in order to fit in the image the others had created about her. In the words of an expert: "Mrs. Breedlove learned

to devalue herself through commercialized fantasies and [was] teaching her daughter a similar sense of unworthiness.” (Rosenberg, 440) Vágnerová defined self-evaluating emotions that create an important part of self-conception, and that are formed by the evaluation of adults, peers, and one’s own experience. Self-evaluating emotions affect the self-esteem as well as self-respect, both these qualities are necessary for the feeling of one’s acceptability, or, on the contrary, for the feeling of one’s incompetence, inferiority. (2005, 264) An extract from *The Bluest Eye* illustrates the sources of Pecola’s self-evaluating emotions, the evaluation by others that was infiltrated into their actions and words:

Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she could say, “Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!” and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused. (Morrison, 34)

The image of Pecola’s ugliness and uselessness had been implanted into her mind by Mrs. Breedlove, her classmates reacted on this presumed image and fixed and deformed the already negative self-evaluating emotions. As if they were able to take notice of a tiny chink in an otherwise smooth surface and then ripped it open, they spotted that Pecola’s ugliness “came from conviction, [her] conviction” (Morrison, 28) and mocked her uneasiness. What motivated the oppressed black children and adults to the mockery of even weaker and more oppressed black child was the fact that they felt, when they contrasted themselves with Pecola, less inferior, i.e. they “honed [their] egos on her”. (Morrison, 163) When seeing somebody who was in their eyes more inferior, they familiarized with the satisfactory feeling of not being the most minute ones. Using the extract from *The Bluest Eye* to illustrate the pressure that affected every black person, the beauty code imposed on them and thus defining their value, it can be noted that only standing next to Pecola and her ugliness were these black people able to deny their ultimate inferiority, the inferiority they tried to mask so deliberately:

The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. (Morrison, 28)

Claudia, the narrator and one of the former closest Pecola’s friends, was fully aware of the impact of her actions on Pecola, understood her calculating, humiliating attitude, explained her incentives and asked for understanding, not for forgiveness. As she disclosed in retrospect, her attitude as well as the attitude of others did not despise Pecola as a person, they despised Pecola as the bearer of certain qualities they themselves possessed, the bearer of qualities they hated. They chose Pecola because of her weakness, because they presumed she had nothing to lose. From Pecola’s point of view, their culpable behaviour was fully justifiable and understandable, considering the blame and guilt she herself felt, being already a broken child. The following extract from *The Bluest Eye* depicts this point in Claudia’s speech:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. (Morrison, 162-163)

With reference to Vágnerová’s definition of self-evaluating emotions mentioned and explained above, the process of Richard Wright’s self-esteem and self-respect formation based on his experience with evaluation by both adults and his peers can be analysed and compared to Pecola’s one in the forthcoming section.

In comparison to Pecola, Richard’s self-evaluating emotions were not so deeply undermined because there was his mother who sparingly cultivated them. Vágnerová connects this role with the child’s ability to trust the world and subsequently to gain self-confidence. (1997, 99) In addition to this, Richard’s beatings usually followed some of his actions, even though they were often extremely tough. Still, the fact that Richard was able to connect them to concrete events made them understandable: “I had often been painfully beaten, but almost always I had felt that the beatings were somehow right and sensible, [...]” (Wright, 105) Based on his experience, Richard was able to distinguish threatening

and non-threatening situations and thus establish the sense of righteousness. It seemed that the stronger were the beatings, the stronger became this sense in Richard's perception. The beating that followed after Richard set the house on fire was decidedly also one that settled the self-evaluating emotions:

“You almost scared us to death,” my mother muttered as she stripped the leaves from a tree limb to prepare it for my back.
I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness. I was beaten out of my senses and later I found myself in bed, screaming, determined to run away, tussling with my mother and father who were trying to keep me still.
(Wright, 5)

As a consequence of this kind of violent experience, Richard's reactions in the moments of threat lead him to an instinctive, defensive behaviour. Often in his life did Richard fight with somebody – with people unknown to him, whites, and his relatives. In the words of Ralph Ellison: “[...] Wright, with his sensitivity, extreme shyness, and intelligence was a problem child, who rejected his family and was by them rejected.” (Ellison) Richard's resentment towards his family culminated in the fight with his aunt Addie that was preceded by a conflict in the classroom where she beat him “for a reason that was not right” (Wright, 105) and thus he “felt the equal of an adult”. (Wright, 105) The severity of his reaction surprised Richard himself:

She stood debating. Then she made up her mind and came at me. I lunged at her with the knife and she grasped my hand and tried to twist the knife loose. I threw my right leg about her legs and gave her a shove, tripping her; we crashed to the floor. She was stronger than I and I felt my strength ebbing; she was still fighting for my knife and I saw a look on her face that made me feel she was going to use it on me if she got possession of it. I bit her hand and we rolled, kicking, scratching, hitting, fighting as though we were strangers, deadly enemies, fighting for our lives. (Wright, 106)

Richard's surprising, shocking reaction to the unreasonable, unjustifiable demand of his aunt stems from the lack of parental interest. Although his deprivation in emotional sphere was not as striking as in Pecola's case, the failure in parental care inevitably brought about its consequences. According to Vágnerová's study based on Matějček's findings,

children whose emotional needs were not satisfactorily fulfilled tend to react in an angry manner because deprivation in any emotional sphere causes mental strain that in some cases grows into lasting characteristic feature. (1997, 104) The “mental strain” not only caused Richard’s over-reactions in the situations of threat but it also indicated his hypersensitivity in other than threatening situations. His exposure to the nerve-wrecking experience and the denial of a shelter in combination with constant physical hunger lead inevitably to weakness, yet Richard decided not to surrender to the pressures of the environment. In fact, he was determined to keep his promise: “I’m not going to let anybody beat me.” (Wright, 22) An expert depicted Richard’s character in *Black Boy* as follows: “[...] the young child is presented as a rebel who refuses to compromise with the dictates of society and family.” (Hakutani, 74) Regardless of what everybody ordered him, Richard clearly denied the authority of all people in power, i.e. his relatives, teachers, and whites. Furthermore, Hakutani depicts Wright’s belief that “Most black people [...] do adjust to their environment for survival. But in doing so they lose individuality, self-respect, and dignity.” (Hakutani, 72) Richard acted as if he was fully aware of the danger of losing his individuality and tried to build and retain it at all costs, against the will of his family if it was inevitable. He did not find support for his acts, by contrast, Richard rallied his strength from disgust and defiance, resistance to the pressures put on him. The stronger were the pressures, the more powerful became Richard’s antagonism: “Ought one to surrender to authority even if one believed that that authority was wrong? If the answer was yes, then I knew that I would always be wrong, because I could never do it.” (Wright, 165)

Richard’s relatives failed to realize that everything that they considered spoilt and ruined in Richard’s character was in fact the result of their own treatment, or rather the lack of it. They only needed the child when it was convenient to them, in other times they disclaimed him: “Your’re dead to me, dead to Christ.” (Wright, 143) Needless to say, the conscientious upbringing demands constant care, not an accidental one. What is more, the hostile behaviour and misunderstandings did not help Richard to idealise and follow the example of any of his relatives, on the contrary, he felt naturally disinclined to do so. Hence, once he demonstrated his disrespect, the outrage of his relatives was provoked and they felt an urging necessity to manifest their power. Therefore, the situation had no

satisfactory solution neither for Richard nor for his family, it led to Richard's emotional and physical deprivation. In the words of an expert, such deprivation plays a considerable role in one's identity formation, it shapes one's self-consciousness:

Consciousness is not inherent in the essential character of man; on the contrary, it is a psychological state which must be determined by experiencing distress and subsequently reflecting upon it. (Tate, 117)

Richard reflected and reasoned about the distress he experienced, indeed, he used to draw conclusions from what happened to him and for this reason he was different from his peers. In fact, in *Black Boy* no trace of real friendship can be found, no specific friend with whom Richard could share his world of ideas. One of the reasons for his non-acceptance by his peers may have been his frequent movements, the other his grandmother's deeply religious household that did not allow Richard to work and earn money for his food. In result of the grandmother's conduct, he spent hungry days excluded from his classmates because he was ashamed of his starvation, because he was too proud to allow anybody to come closer and see his misery: "Again and again I vowed that someday I would end this hunger of mine, this apartness, this eternal difference;" (Wright, 125) Even after he was seemingly part of a group Richard felt excluded, irrespective of his sincere wish to belong somewhere:

I liked it and I did not like it; I longed to be among them, yet when with them I looked at them as if I were a million miles away. I had been kept out of their world too long ever to be able to become a real part of it. (Wright, 151)

One more characteristic feature related to self-consciousness caused Richard's involuntary isolation and loneliness – his natural curiosity. The fact that the Jim Crow schooling intended for blacks was of negligible quality did not discourage Richard from his yearn for knowledge, only it disapproved of it because black educated children were not desirable, they could compromise whites' superiority. Therefore Richard's questions were

never answered and his talent was never cultivated. The following extract from *Black Boy* shows the mixed feelings of both Richard's peers and his teachers:

My classmates felt that I was doing something that was vaguely wrong, but they did not know how to express it. As the outside world grew more meaningful, I became more concerned, tense; and my classmates and my teachers would say: "Why do you ask so many questions?" (Wright, 170)

To put it clearly, Richard's interest in the worldly matters overreached the limits of his peers and therefore he misunderstood them and was by them misunderstood. Again, such difference required stronger character from its bearer for Richard could not "hide in a crowd", he simply was not a part of any. In his rebellion, Richard instinctively opposed to the life in conformity in every one of its aspects, his nature forced him to differ: "I could submit and live the life of a genial slave, but that was impossible. All of my life had shaped me to live by my own feelings and thoughts." (Wright, 255) The critic Hakutani sustained the point of Richard's exceptionality and connected complexity of his emotions:

Although he identified himself with a mistreated group, there was a crucial difference between him and other black children. They constantly complained about petty wrongs they suffered, but they had no desire to question the larger issues of racial oppression. [...] The young Wright [...] found among the black boys no sympathy for his inquiring mind. As a result he was forced to contemplate such questions for himself. (Hakutani, 74)

In short, in a sharp contrast with Pecola, Richard's definition of the "I" was independent on the reflection of this "I" in the eyes of others. His will was strong enough to oppose, deny, and redefine their wrong presumption. While Pecola built her secret inner world as a safe place where she could dwell without feeling shame and pain, Richard's inner world served him as a source of power that nobody could violate. As its preservation was conditioned by Richard's unwillingness to compromise, he could never "willingly present [himself] to be kicked, as Shorty had done. [He] would rather have died than do that." (Wright, 255) For Richard, his truthfulness started in his consciousness and he did not allow himself to act in dispute with his dignity, however that meant to act in dispute

with generally accepted rules. In practice, when dealing with others, his behaviour was frequently the cause of mutual bewilderment:

“I walked home slowly, asking myself what on earth was the matter with me, why it was I never seemed to do things as people expected them to be done. Every word and gesture I made seemed to provoke hostility.” (Wright, 142)

Although the life in hostile environment was difficult for Richard, he did not feel the shame and guilt for those actions of others that he considered wrong. Pecola, on the other hand, carried all of her family’s shame, she was ashamed instead of her family. Together with the shame and guilt she adopted the responsibility for actions of others, however powerless she was in influencing them. In her shamefaced powerlessness the others saw the scapegoat of their hatred, having been hurt they needed to hurt and relieve themselves by directing the loathing on her back in the act of sacrifice. Richard Wright also observed this tendency: “I had seen many Negroes solve the problem of being black by transferring their hatred of themselves to others with a black skin and fighting them.” (Wright, 255) In her absurd and absolute guilt, Pecola felt the shame of being black, of being mocked by blacks, of her actions as well as of the actions of her classmates. By every word against her, they hardened her conviction of her own uselessness and responsibility for whatever happened near her. In their desire to mask their own vulnerable blackness, they decided to victimize Pecola:

It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds—cooled—and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (Morrison, 50)

What was still worse than the contempt of the black peers was the ignorance in the eyes of white adults, experienced by both, Pecola and Richard. The offence caused by total indifference and disrespect undermined the rest of Pecola’s courage and it intensely injured

Richard. The following example from *The Bluest Eye* depicts one such situation: “She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition—the glazed separateness.” (Morrison, 36) Petty but frequent lessons like this unerringly taught Richard and Pecola their place within the society, they formed their “Is”, or rather deformed them. The loss of identity induced by constant physical and psychological white threat was in Richard’s case only temporal, in Pecola’s case permanent. When describing his moments of non-existence, Richard spoke for both of them: “I was a non-man, something that knew vaguely that it was human but felt that it was not.” (Wright, 196)

Fortunately for Richard, his strong life philosophy did not allow him to sink into total isolation. He had his hope in better future, a notion that had never occurred to Pecola. Richard sensed hidden meanings in his life experiences, Pecola absorbed the rotten parts of life and was so full that she could not bear any more. While Pecola succumbed to the pressures of white society and its implications transmitted through her parents and peers, Richard converted the evil into his strength – Pecola was bent by it. He was attracted by the idea of freedom:

In me was shaping a yearning for a kind of consciousness, a mode of being that the way of life about me had said could not be, must not be, and upon which the penalty of death had been placed. (Wright, 170)

All things considered, the process of identity formation was in both cases, Pecola’s and Richard’s, tremendously influenced by their parents and peers. The presence or absence of the mother figure played a decisive role as well as the intensity of violence to which both children were exposed and in which they were actively involved. While Richard’s beatings were merely severe aspect of traditional poor black upbringing, they had nothing to do with a destructive way of Pecola’s dehumanized initiation. Richard’s advantage of being a boy and having the mother’s support, however limited, developed into his growing up despite the will of others. Contrastingly, Pecola’s identity was torn into pieces primarily by her mother who, similarly to many other “cold blacks” (Wright, 255) as Wright called it directed her animosity towards her daughter in a hopeless attempt to ease her troubled black

identity that was unable to compete with the movie images. Finally, Pecola's identity was violently and unjustifiably stolen from her – and extinguished.

7. Conclusion

Taking into the account the position of black southern Americans at the beginning of the 20th century, their status was constantly deteriorating due to the powerful organizations such as Ku Klux Klan and widespread support of the idea of white superiority that brought about such changes in government that prevented blacks from any influence on lawgiving and justice. Having been stripped of all rights, penniless and powerless, blacks had to face oppression in multiple forms. Living under the constant threat of violence in the country where whites delimited the space for blacks, blacks became prisoners of their own mind. For their children there was no freedom, proper education, or play, i.e. there existed no future. Under such circumstances, Du Bois' double-consciousness together with the respect of Ritterhouse's racial etiquette served as a shield against unprovoked intimidation.

Consequently, the new idea of sheltered childhood did not apply to the poor black families because they simply could not afford such a luxury. On the contrary, in addition to the violence of white part of the society, black children were severely beaten by their own parents who intended to protect them against white threat and thus needed to imprint the fear, shame, and watchfulness into their young minds. Concrete stories of Pecola Breedlove and Richard Wright added emotional dimension to the historical facts, the dimension depicting the initiation of the two protagonists and the quickened process of their maturation as a result of rough living conditions created by the society.

Richard's and Pecola's fate was predetermined by the fact that they were born into poor black families who taught them that they were stigmatized by their blackness, they failed in teaching them that the value of an individual did not depend on the prejudice of the society, they provided no support. Richard's and Pecola's contradictory attitudes to the question of one's race, Richard's rebellion and Pecola's humility, were tightly interwoven with their self-confidence, an aspect that normally stems from the relationship with one's parents.

Speaking of the parental role, neither Pecola's nor Richard's parents softened the impact of the violent Jim Crow world onto their children. What is more, they worsened it by failing to fulfill basic needs of a child, i.e. food, clothing, care, love, and attention.

While Richard's severe beatings were supposed to lead to his awareness of the dangers of the world, Pecola's abuse had no chance to be interpreted as a protective effort, it merely temporarily relieved the parents' social anxiety. The maltreatment of both children, however, resulted in their alienation from their parents and in constant fear from an unexpected violent attack. Sensing nothing but hostility, confused Pecola and Richard fought an exhausting struggle in every encounter with other people, both white and black, they learnt to hide their natural reactions and showed the expected ones, at times they did not express any reactions at all, trying to overpower the fear that bound their hands and tongues.

Gender issue, similarly to a racial one, was a socially built phenomenon that Pecola and Richard had to learn. Boyhood and girlhood is and was understood as a set of biologically given features that are conditioned by the society. Both families concerned, i.e. Pecola's and Richard's, were predominated by women because fathers were either absent, or alcoholics (Cholly), or absent alcoholics (Richard's father, Cholly later in *The Bluest Eye*).

Gender and the values of the society are just two sides of the same coin and therefore it is not surprising that the codes dictated by the society are applied also in the definitions of gender roles. Thus, the beauty code that disclaimed the worth of the girls who did not look like Shirley Temple had its impact on the minds of black girls. Pecola wholeheartedly respected this code that degraded her, it became a fundamental part of her identity formation process. Richard, on the other hand, defined his identity by opposing to all authorities and their orders.

The role of sexuality in Pecola's life had a character of sexual abuse and further suffering as she was impregnated during an incestuous encounter with Cholly, her father. The indifference of black neighbourhood was alarming, the fact that a victim had no right for fair treatment was obvious. Richard, contrastingly, was the one whose sexuality was ignored during his encounters with white prostitutes, who was appalled by their shamelessness, and this was only possible due to the fact that the prostitutes simply did not regard him as a human being worth consideration.

While the role of religion and belonging to some church was vital for an identification of oneself with the black community, it also prevented individual action and independent thinking, which served to a great satisfaction of white men. Blacks' insistence of one's belief in God was, however, not based on their humanity, these two issues need to be distinguished. Pecola, adopting all of her mother's values, also adopted the belief in God, distant and indifferent entity that was asked for blue eyes, Pecola's only listener in times before her insanity. Richard, opposing all the imposed values, also resisted the pressures of his grandmother who insisted on his daily prayers. Nevertheless, he did not resist to the pressure of his mother as the question of being baptised became at the same time a question of his relationship to her. In Richard's eyes, religion, similarly to sex matters, was an instrument of power. In both novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Black Boy*, the protagonists lived surrounded by evil while the existence of God was both questioned and questionable.

All in all, identity and its formation was a gradual and non-ceasing process that mingled with racial and gender issues, fulfilled or unfulfilled parental roles, absence or presence of role-models, and utilized instruments of power that bent or broke the psyche of Pecola and Richard. The multiplicity and contradictory nature of various influences, and in particular the indifference of parents, extinguished the joy of these children and substituted it with fear and pain. Richard became rough as he felt a stranger within his own relatives, Pecola surrendered to the constant pressure of Mrs. Breedlove and Cholly. The ultimate wish of both, Pecola and Richard, was to escape from the prison of pain and hate that was not adequate to their age, and they used all their energy and strength to fulfil their dreams in two different, original ways.

8. Resumé

K pochopení osudů dětských hrdinů Pecoly Breedlove a Richarda Wrighta, jak jsou zachyceny v dílech *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrisonové a *Black Boy* Richarda Wrighta je třeba zvážit společenské postavení černošských obyvatel ve Spojených Státech Amerických na počátku 20. století. V této době, dlouho po zákazu obchodů s otroky, společnost stále považovala černochoy za méněcenné a dělala vše pro to, aby jejich postavení zůstalo i nadále znevýhodněné. Tzv. Jim Crow zákony, které umožnily rasovou segregaci, byly nástrojem k utlačování černochoů ve všech směrech, a přestože narážely na určitý odpor, uspěly v rasové především díky většinové podpoře bílého obyvatelstva a ilegálním organizacím jako např. Ku Klux Klan, které za pomoci násilí zastrašovaly černochoy a zabraňovaly jim volit i ve volbách kandidovat.

Ovšem hlad po rovnosti dával černým obyvatelům sílu, takže vznikaly organizace jako NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), které usilovaly především o rovná práva, právo volit, a právo na vzdělání. Boj o zrovnoprávnění černochoů byl zároveň bojem Severu s Jihem o politickou kontrolu Jihu, takže jejich práva stála v pozadí vyšších politických cílů. Černá populace ztratila jakoukoli moc i možnost této moci dosáhnout, k čemuž napomohlo několik faktorů, v první řadě však nekvalitní vzdělání a ekonomická zatíženost, ale také nemožnost dostat se k dobře placenému místu.

V důsledku zadluženosti, děti černošských obyvatel byly nuceny pracovat, a to i přesto, že v této době začalo být dětství chápáno jako období, kdy člověk má být chráněn před vlivy vnějšího světa. Rozdíly ve zkušenostech černých a bílých dětí byly pouhým odrazem stavu společnosti té doby. Pravdou ale zůstává, že ne všechny bílé děti byly dostatečným způsobem chráněny, některé byly dokonce úmyslně vystavovány násilí páchaném na černoších, aby se naučily, jak se k této minoritě mají chovat. Taková rasová výchova pak vedla jen k dalšímu prohlubování rozdílů mezi mentalitami černých a bílých obyvatel.

Život v neustálém strachu z pronásledování nutil černé obyvatele vypěstovat si obranný mechanismus, naučili se nedávat najevo své pocity, pouze očekávané reakce, což

je na jednu stranu degradovalo a ponižovalo, na stranu druhou to ovšem byla účinná ochrana.

Jelikož by bylo nemožné zachytit osudy všech utiskovaných, literární díla *The Bluest Eye* a *Black Boy* slouží jako důležitý, hlubší rozměr k historickým faktům, která mohou pro svou informativní hodnotu někdy opomenout citovou složku, tj. složku tak důležitou pro kvalitu lidského života. Pecola spolu s Richardem představují dva konkrétní (a proto neocenitelné) příběhy dospívání na americkém Jihu počátkem dvacátého století, které podkřývají vlivy, které mohly působit a působily na životy mnoha dalších, nepojmenovaných černých dětí.

Fakt, že Pecola i Richard vyrůstali v nejchudších vrstvách společnosti ještě zvyšoval nebezpečí, ve kterém se nacházeli už jen díky tomu, že se narodili jako černí. Rasismus, jakkoli souvisí s rasou, je pouze sociální konstrukt, který si bílí vytvořili k udržení své mocenské, a nutno dodat výhodné, pozice. Dítě, které v takové společnosti vyrůstá, takové normy přijímá a své chování dle nich reguluje, jeho vývoj je tedy ovlivněn. To platilo jak pro bílé, tak pro černé děti, jelikož bílé děti byli vedeny k tomu, aby si s černými dětmi nehrály a neudržovaly s nimi pokud možno žádný styk, a aby chápaly rozdílnost, tedy nadřazenost, svého postavení.

Černé děti se naopak musely naučit v tomto mnohdy krutém světě přežít, většinou ho zdánlivě akceptovaly, zatímco v duchu ho odmítaly. Pecola a Richard byli v tomto ohledu výjimkou, protože ani jeden z nich nereagoval většinovým způsobem. Richard se odmítl přizpůsobit a zachovával si za všech okolností svou identitu, což vedlo k nebezpečným situacím, zejména v interakci s bílými. Pecola reagovala opačně, přijala normy bílého obyvatelstva za své a sama sebe hodnotila podle těchto norem. Obě tyto reakce byly okolím odmítány, opovrhovány.

Richardova touha po spravedlnosti a lepší budoucnosti ostře kontrastovala s Pecolinou smířeností a naprostou odevzdaností se osudu, což se odrazilo i na Richardově aktivitě a Pecolině pasivitě, a i přes rozdílný přístup se stávali oba terčem násilí. Nutnost pracovat přivedla Richarda do mnoha nebezpečných situací zejména při výkonu pracovních povinností, jelikož frekvence setkání s bílými tak rostla. Pecola se stala terčem násilí vlastních rodičů, kteří neunesli břímě, které na ně kladla bílá společnost. Nutno dodat, že ve

společnosti, kde černoši nebyli považováni za rovnocenné, se o práva zneužívaných a zanedbávaných černých dětí nikdo nestaral, a v případě Pecoly a Richarda byla lhostejnost a vina i na straně vlastní komunity.

Role rodiny, která závisela přímo na charakterech rodičů, byla totiž udržitelná jenom za předpokladu, že rodiče se s touto rolí v zemi, kde platily různé zákony pro každou etnickou skupinu, uměli vypořádat. Pro černé děti mnohdy platilo, že byly bity jenom proto, aby se snáze přizpůsobily krutému životu, který je čekal. Takové bylo i Richardovo dětství, protože otec i matka ho neváhali surově bít, ač tím ohrožovali i jeho zdraví. Richardův otec nikdy neplatil za jeho vzor, jejich vztah byl spíše vztah dvou cizinců žijících náhodou ve stejné domácnosti. Až později po otcově odchodu si Richard uvědomil jak moc na něm a jeho příjmu rodina závisela. Richardova matka po odchodu otce navíc onemocněla a Richard a jeho bratr poprvé poznali, co je to opravdový hlad. Jako následek neschopnosti matky postarat se o své děti byl Richard závislý na alkoholu ještě dříve, než vůbec začal chodit do školy, a znal snad všechny vulgární výrazy, přestože si neuvědomoval, co všechno znamenají. Matčina situace ale nebyla jednoduchá, musela se o své dvě děti postarat, protože na sociální dávky, vzhledem ke své rase, neměla nárok.

Rodiče Pecoly nemohli svoje děti naučit nic jiného než nenávisť, jelikož nenáviděli sebe a společnost, ve které žili za to, co jim udělala. Otec Pecoly, Cholly, se nikdy nevyrovnal s ponížením z mládí, kdy byl obětí krutého žertu dvou bělochů, kteří ho donutili simulovat sexuální styk s jeho přítelkyní Darlene. Následkem svého traumatu se Cholly choval násilně ke všem ženám, své manželce, i své dceři. Matka Pecoly, Pauline, se zase ztotožnila s ideálem blond krásy, který viděla ve filmech, a její vlastní život a vlastní rodina a děti shledala méněcennými, což jim dávala patřičně najevo. Náplní jejího života se stal obdiv ideálů, které byli uznávány bílými lidmi, a tento obdiv rostl ze závisti, kterou k těmto lidem pocítovala. Pecola se stala obětí násilí obou rodičů, a kromě toho musela být také svědkem násilí, které si způsobovali navzájem, což vedlo ke ztrátě sebevědomí a citové deprivaci.

Role rodičů byla pro děti důležitá i z hlediska definování genderových rolí, přijetí těchto rolí a vymezení vlastní identity ve vztahu k těmto rolím. Mužská a ženská role však nejsou v této práci chápány jako pojmy protikladné, pouze rozdílné. Člověk s pomocí

rodičů chápe a rozvíjí roli, ke které má genetické dispozice, tj. podle toho, zda se narodil jako chlapec či děvče. Genderové role, podobně jako rasismus, jsou určovány, vymezovány, či diktovány většinovou společností. Pokud mluvíme o americkém Jihu na počátku 20. století, mužské a ženské role byly chápány rozdílně také v závislosti na barvě pleti.

Identifikace Richarda a Pecoly s rodičem vlastního pohlaví a vymezení se k rodiči opačného pohlaví a následné vymezení sebe sama bylo problematické kvůli problematickým povahám rodičů. Pauline učila Pecolu uctívat hodnoty, které ve svém bezprostředním okolí neviděla a které jí byly svou povahou vzdálené a nedosažitelné. Již od prvního dne učila svou dceru, že je bezcenná, společnosti neužitečná, a hlavně (což bylo pro Pauline prioritou) nehezká. Pecola díky této systematické výchově ani nezapochybovala o pravdivosti matčina tvrzení, což vedlo k vnitřnímu utrpení, které vyplývalo z takto podřazené a bezvýhodné role. Cholly také neměl pro Pecolu váhu autority, spíše se ho stranila a bála zároveň pro jeho bezostyšnou a násilnou povahu. Richard, jak už bylo řečeno, se se svým otcem nikdy neztotožnil, otcovský model chování mu v dětství chyběl, byl vychováván převážně ženami – svou matkou, babičkou, a tetou, zatímco žádný ze strýců, ani jeho děda ho zásadním způsobem neovlivnil.

Co se týče sexuality, Pecola a černošské ženy obecně byly vystaveny útokům bílých mužů. Ona sama žádným z nich napadena nebyla, ale zato byla zneužita svým otcem a čekala s ním dítě. Tento traumatický zážitek ještě zhoršilo hrubé zacházení matky, která místo porozumění a útěchy Pecolu surově zbilá a zavrhlá. Sousedé a známí se poté od rodiny distancovali, Pecola musela přestat chodit do školy. Richardova zkušenost, kdy obsluhoval bílé prostitutky, které se před ním naprosto nestyděly být nahé, poukazovala na fakt, že status černošského chlapce byl natolik nízký, že na něho nebylo třeba brát zřetel, jeho sexualita v tomto případě byla naprosto ignorována. Naopak v jiných případech byli černoši považováni za hrozbu bílých žen, a úhel pohledu závisel výlučně na účelnosti, nikoli na chování samotných černých mužů.

Náboženství a víra v Boha byly černochoy, kteří žili ve Spojených Státech Amerických na počátku 20. století, chápány jako nástroj, který sdružoval a zároveň pomáhal zapomenout na strasti každodenního života, který dával naději. Pro Richarda ani Pecolu

nemělo žádný význam chodit do kostela, jelikož Pecola věřila v Boha a modlila se k němu i bez pomoci institucí, a Richard pochyboval, že by mu chození do kostela a sounáležitost k církvi pomohlo v jeho vztahu s Bohem. Pro Richarda bylo náboženství spojené s institucí další formou útlaku, který na něho byl vyvíjen jeho příbuznými a společností, a proto ho odmítal. Přestože se Pecola modlila k Bohu, aby jí dal modré oči, které by jí pomohly vidět jiný, lepší svět, musela si najít prostředníka, který by jí toto přání vyplnil, a tímto prostředníkem se stal misantrop jménem Soaphead Church. Tak jako Richard věřil, že existuje ďábel, ale o existenci Boha přesvědčen nebyl, věřil Soaphead Church, že je v jeho silách konat božské skutky, a tudíž neváhal vmanipulovat Pecolu do situace, která vedla ke ztrátě jejího duševního zdraví. Jeho akt byl zároveň aktem pomsty Bohu za zmařený život, za příkoří, které byl nucen podstoupit.

Všechny výše zmíněné faktory formovaly identitu Pecoly a Richarda, úloha rodičů však v tomto ohledu hrála zásadní roli. Dítě si utváří identitu během interakce se svými rodiči, a tuto identitu si pak dále utvrzuje, nebo vyvrací, v interakci se svými vrstevníky. Protože Pecole byla vštípena myšlenka, že je ošklivá a neužitečná, a protože ona sama tuto myšlenku bezvýhradně přijala a tím sama sebe trýznila, vstupoval do školního kolektivu jako deprimovaná dívka. Děti si ji pak vybraly jako oběť šikany, chápaly ji jako nositelku všech vlastností, které samy na sobě nenáviděly. Svou nenávist pak na Pecole ventilovaly, čímž jí způsobovaly ještě větší újmu a v důsledku zmařily už tak velmi nízké sebevědomí. Richard naopak zaujal pro své sebevědomí zdravější, i když v dané době nebezpečný, rebelantský postoj, vymezoval se ke všem autoritám, které ho chtěly násilím donutit k podrobení se. Role rodiny a církve mu sloužila jako příklad chování, kterého se chtěl vyvarovat. Aby si vážil sebe sama, nemohl Richard dovolit ostatním, aby ho ponižovali, a to i za cenu sebevětšího sebezapření.

Uvědomování si své vlastní hodnoty bylo podmíněno, nebo v Pecolině případě narušeno, funkcí rodiny, její rolí, působením rodičů, jejichž pohled na svět se odrážel v jejich chování vůči dětem. Spolupůsobení sociálních vlivů jako rasismus, genderové role, ekonomická nesoběstačnost a nevzdělanost vedlo děti k tomu, aby pocítily tíhu života na okraji společnosti, věčné ohrožení, a ztrátu naděje na lepší budoucnost. Tyto vlivy vedly

Richarda k neustálému boji proti tlaku, protože jenom tak mohl najít sebe sama, a Pecolu zlomily a dovedly ji k vysvobození ve stavu „sebe-nevědomí“.

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