

TW: Discussion of sexual assault; no explicit details

## How Racial Oppression Critically Shaped the Character of Cholly Breedlove in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

For SFPIRG's Radical Reads May pick, we read, and discussed, Toni Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Set in 1940-1941, *The Bluest Eye* tells the heartbreaking story of eleven year old Pecola Breedlove and the people around her in the town of Lorain, Ohio. What struck me most about this novel was Morrison's commitment to portraying all of her characters as human and therefore as warranting sympathy and understanding, if not approval for their actions, as she switches between their perspectives. This includes those she could have easily condemned. In particular, Pecola's father, Cholly Breedlove. It is significant that Cholly's backstory is shared before the scene where he rapes Pecola. As a reader, you sympathise with his life story and see how racism and oppression have deeply impacted him. Then, you are forced to endure the intensely uncomfortable scene of the rape right on the heels of your sympathy for him.

The humanisation of Cholly, a man who rapes his own daughter, holds particular significance because of his racial identity as a black man. Throughout history, black men have been subjected to dehumanising portrayals, often characterised as animalistic, hypersexual, and prone to violence. In the novel, Morrison forces the reader to consider how racism has fundamentally shaped Cholly's character and life trajectory, including the rape of Pecola. What if Cholly had been born into a world without racism and racial oppression? Would he have raped Pecola at all? Cholly, Morrison I believe is asserting, was not inherently a rapist, was not inherently an "evil" person. Rape is thus reframed as (at least partially) being an issue of systemic racism. This implicates white readers as the shadow of white

supremacy (from which white people continue to benefit) looms. Indeed, Morrison writes in the foreword that she does not want readers to be able to slip into the comfort of pitying Pecola, but rather to prompt them into an interrogation of themselves.

The work Morrison is undertaking to humanise Cholly, also reminded me of a previous book we at SFPIRG read for Radical Reads, *Abolition Feminism Now*. Abolitionists often encounter the question “what about the rapists?”. What would be done with them if there were no prisons? How would they be brought to justice? *The Bluest Eye* does not focus on if or how Cholly is punished for the rape but rather emphasises the possibility that the rape could have never happened in the first place. Prevention is a cornerstone of abolition, and Cholly’s story highlights how prevention was needed and could have, perhaps, fundamentally altered the course of events.

Morrison writes on the final page of the novel “[l]ove is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe” (206). In asserting that Cholly’s rape of Pecola is a form of warped love, Morrison makes a bold and controversial claim, complicating an often oversimplified and individualized subject and revealing how the forces of power and oppression (in this case particularly racial oppression) are intimately and tragically connected to sexual assault.