The Faces of Oppression

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Bluest Eye*
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Introduction

In Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the protagonist Janie has three important male relationships through her life. All of them are her husbands and they play different parts in her development as a woman. The narrative structure in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* can best be observed through Aristotle’s view on plots. The novel has a beginning, a middle and an end and there is a cause and effect chain where the events are caused by previous actions. The first event is that Janie kisses a boy which leads to her first marriage with Logan. This loveless marriage leads to Janie accompanying Joe when they meet and she thereby leaves Logan. The events continue with Janie and Joe living together and when Joe dies Janie meets Tea Cake and the two of them become a couple. When Tea Cake dies Janie returns home where she tells her story in recollections of what has happened since she left town, thus most of the story is told through flashbacks of Janie’s life.

Toni Morrison’s novel is similar in terms of structure and its focus on a central female character: *The Bluest Eye* also begins near the end and then proceeds from the beginning with the events that eventually lead to the end along with flashbacks from a couple of the characters’ lives. It is told by an omniscient narrator as well as being told by a first person narrator. The novel focuses on different characters but the main one is Pecola, an African American girl who lives with her parents Pauline and Cholly and an older brother.

I have chosen to study oppression in these two novels by observing the men’s roles and functions; how they behave and what could be the cause of their actions. I will examine whether the male characters follow social structures, if patriarchy is something noticeable and how this affect the female characters. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* I will look at Logan, Joe and Tea Cake and how they influence Janie. In *The Bluest Eye* I will focus on Cholly and how he affects Pecola. My specific overarching question is: *What part do the men play in the oppression of the women in the novels?* Which leads to my sub-questions being: *What expectations does society have of men and women? How do society and gender roles affect men? How does whiteness play a role in the black society in the novels?* To begin with I will look at different theories that are suitable for my focus area.

Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher and gender theorist, argues in her book *Gender Trouble* that both sex and gender are culturally constructed, as opposed to the common thought of sex being a biological matter. She argues that “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-
floating article, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (6). So Butler reasons that the term “sex” is not essentially a fact but instead something that is socially constructed. The reflection of masculine and feminine is something I will consider when studying the novels.

Two authors named Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman also discuss gender in their article *Doing Gender* where they argue that “gender is not a set of traits, nor a variable, nor a role, but the product of social doings of some sort” (129). I will look deeper into their arguments when studying gender and society’s expectations in the novels.

In the book *Understanding Feminism* a political theorist named Carol Patemen suggests that women are prescribed a submissive role and to do domestic work because of their natural function as child-bearers. This amounts to women being considered suitable for caring for others and in that way they become inferior to others. Men on the other hand take the responsibility when it comes to work outside the home, such as decision-making regarding economy and politics. This idea of patriarchal structures is something that can be related to the novels and therefore I will use this when analyzing the plots and the characters’ roles. I will also use the authors’ idea of gender ideology “that naturalizes male domination and women’s oppression” (Bowden and Mummery 18).

Allan G. Johnson also uses the concept of patriarchy in his book *Gender Knot*. He explains it as a society that is “male dominated, male identified, and male centered” (5). What he means by this is that men are dominating important positions in areas such as economy, education, politics and religion. He also comments that society has men as a standard culturally speaking and that men and women are considered to possess different qualities. This interpretation is relevant to my analysis in the way that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie’s husband Joe becomes the ultimate leader in the new town they are building and the reason he becomes this is because he is a man and possesses typical masculine qualities.

A concept within an ethnic perspective is that of racism where people experience social or psychological oppression based on their race and origin. Both the forms “internalized” and “intraracial” racism are relevant to my analysis, where internalized racism refers to people who believe they are inferior to another race by feeling less attractive for example and where intraracial racism means lighter black-skinned people are for instance judged as better than darker black-skinned people.

Another concept that applies well to the chosen novels is called “double
consciousness”, a term named by W.E.B Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He describes it as:

a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (xiii).

What Du Bois means by this is the situation when people belong to two different and conflicting cultures which is applicable to the characters as this is something they experience.

In the book *Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy* the authors mention a term called “intersectionality” meaning the study of more than one minority group or rejected group crossing another. Intersectional theory therefore studies for example class, gender and race and how these together can make people suffer from multiple oppressions. This is good to have in mind when analyzing how Janie and Pecola are affected by oppression in different areas.

**Background**

Zora Neale Hurston was an African American writer born in 1891 in Alabama, USA. When she was a small child she moved with her family to Eatonville where her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes place. It was the first incorporated all-black town in the country and it has existed since 1887. The town was built by African Americans with the purpose of being independent and it has remained this way until the present day. Even though Eatonville is seen as a good example of black empowerment it has not been successful in every aspect; the town has higher poverty rates than the national average. Eatonville has grown little since Hurston lived there and is still quite a rural community with its approximately 2000 citizens. With the help of Hurston who included Eatonville in a Florida travel guide the town became a tourist stop and every year a festival is held in her honor.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937 and is considered to be Hurston’s masterpiece. Most early reviews of the novel were positive. A review written shortly after it was published had many encouraging words about the novel. George Stevens
Nathalie Starke

thinks the story is easy to believe and that the characters and their lives are “authentic”. He
observes that “No one has ever reported the speech of Negroes with a more accurate ear for its
raciness, its rich invention, and its music” (The Saturday Review of Literature). His only
complaints were on a few technical choices in the writing.

A review that differs from the rest is one which was also written the same year
as the novel came out, by Richard Wright. He thought that the only good feature in the novel
is that the dialogue catches how black people’s minds work. But otherwise he believed that
the language is too shallow and that Hurston’s writing follows the tradition of how black
people’s lives are portrayed. I agree that the dialogue is a good feature in the novel but unlike
Wright who thinks it is the only decent feature, I think the language makes the novel a good
folklore fiction which I believe is a positive thing.

Articles about Their Eyes Were Watching God start appearing in the 1980’s. The
most common areas that have interested researchers are identity and personal growth,
feminism, sexism and female-male relations. In 1988 Klaus Benesch argues that “Janie’s
search for identity turns out to be primarily a search for blackness” (629) meaning the
intention to accept skin color. In an article written by Julie Roemer in 1989 she discusses how
the novel is about celebration of the self, or to be clearer; the black female self. According to
her the story is structured to be about a hero (Janie) going on a quest but from a feminist
perspective.

When looking at more recent articles, Maureen McKnight argues in 2007 that
Janie belongs to the generation that wants to find its roots but she has to conform to what
other people want her to do. Janie’s dream of a life similar to the blossom of a pear tree is
damaged due to other people controlling her. In my study of how the male characters
influence Janie I will similarly examine how this affects Janie and stops her from living the
life she wants to live.

In 2009 Tracy Bealer argues that Tea Cake’s character is both idealized but also
shows improper behavior towards Janie. She discusses that even though he is unlike Janie’s
previous husbands he is still dominant in some ways. After his death Janie praises Tea Cake
and gives him a more important role than would have been possible if they would have
continued to be a couple. This is relevant to my analysis since I will be studying the men’s
roles and will thereby be looking at Tea Cake’s behavior. Yvonne Mesa-El Ashmawi also
discusses Tea Cake in her article written the same year. She argues that Tea Cake is neither a
sinner nor saint but lies in between. Compared to Logan and Joe he is a gentleman but as he
does use violence at times he is not flawless. So instead of seeing him as only one thing, he
should be seen as a human. This is an interesting thought concerning my analysis as I see him more as a hero than a villain. I do not argue that he is perfect but I do believe he is more good than evil.

Toni Morrison is also an African American writer who was born in 1931 in Ohio, USA. She attended several universities and began writing novels in 1970 whereupon *The Bluest Eye* was the first to be published. Most of her novels have African American characters who deal with ethnic issues such as being a slave or not being welcome in society. Aside from writing novels she also worked as an editor, critic and has given many lectures in African American literature.

Morrison has been awarded with numerous literary prizes including the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* and she was the first black woman ever to receive the Nobel Prize in 1993. She won with the motivation “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality”. In her acceptance speech Morrison talked about gratitude for her predecessors and writers yet to come; “Their voices bespeak civilizations gone and yet to be; the precipice from which their imaginations gaze will rivet us; they do not blink nor turn away” (*The Nobel Prize in Literature 1993*).

Her novel *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 and in a review from the same year John Leonard claims that the language in the novel is like poetry and that it catches the problems for African Americans who are not able to live up to the American myth of being blond and blue-eyed.

For researchers of *The Blues Eye* the most common areas of interest are racism, ethnic stereotypes, self-identity and African American experience. Articles seem to have started appearing in the 1980’s. In Jane Bakerman’s book from 1981 her focus lies on female initiation, isolation and black women. She discusses how female aspiration is a joke and that there is no way out of the lifestyle they are living and thereby isolation may become a problem. In 1989 Thomas H. Fick argues that the novel is good at exploring racism and that the characters’ cultural heritage occasionally is being repressed by the society they live in.

In recent years researchers have continued to study racism and racism can lead to the feeling of being ugly as well as problems with self-identity which are two other areas interesting to researchers. Rachel Blumenthal writes in 2010 how the black characters, Claudia to name one example, feel socially inferior when being around white characters and Blumenthal argues that Morrison investigates the reasons for racism and self-hatred. The experience of self-hatred and the underlying reasons is relevant to my analysis since I will be studying Cholly’s behavior.
That same year Jerome Bump wrote a book focusing on racism and ugliness. He considers that the novel is good for emotive criticism and that one should try to identify with the characters, and he believes “compassionate grief” is a likely response to Pecola’s life. Bump argues that shame and anger are two central emotions in the novel where Pecola for example does not know where to direct her anger, even though she knows that it emerges from being judged by appearance and the feeling of ugliness. I agree that shame and anger are two important emotions in the novel and that this especially goes for Cholly, who as mentioned before, suffers from self-hatred.

The most recent article written by Emy Koopman in 2013 connects rape to racism. She discusses how incest seems to be partly caused by the consequences of being colonized and how humiliation comes from being black. She continues by saying that whiteness is the ideal which makes it hard to find beauty in blackness. Koopman also analyzes how Cholly became emasculated by two men at a young age which has caused him to feel abjection. That Cholly was emasculated and the aftermath because of this is something I will look further into. I too will argue that whiteness is something that Pecola for example longs for and that she because of this cannot feel beautiful when her skin has another color.

**Patriarchy and Social Position**

In this section I will discuss the system of patriarchy in which men are in the centre and ruling and women come second. In Nancy McHugh’s book *Feminist Philosophies A-Z* it says that patriarchy’s literary meaning is “father rule”. She continues by explaining patriarchy as when women suffer from oppression in marriages and policies for instance due to social structures. Because men are ruling and therefore often more involved in the public area it is easier for men to attain a high social position than it is for women who are held back and oppressed.

Allan G. Johnson writes that “… the vast majority of men who aren’t powerful but are instead dominated by other men can still feel some connection with the idea of male dominance and with men who are powerful” (9). In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Logan is not very powerful but rather quite a simple man without high social standing despite owning his own land where he works all day. Even though he is quite insignificant in society he still has a higher social standing than Janie. The marriage with her in the beginning of the plot is due to the fact that Janie one day kisses a boy which causes her being more or less forced to marry Logan for safety. He is a stable man with “his often-mentioned sixty acres” (Hurston
that Janie ought to be glad to marry because it signifies that she is a decent woman with a man by her side that has what it takes to take care of her. Hence the marriage of Janie and Logan is not out of love but because of Janie’s grandmother’s wish to protect her.

When Janie leaves Logan and first meets Joe in the middle of the plot his social position is not very high, but as he becomes mayor in Eatonville his social position and social status increase to become the highest in town. This situation in Eatonville is a result of patriarchy because as Allan G. Johnson stated; the society is “male dominated, male identified and male centered”. The town is male dominated in the way that the mayor is a man and that is not questioned by anyone, it is natural for Joe to become the highest leader since he has the wanted qualities. That is also what makes the town male identified; since he has qualities that are valued the highest, these being that he is determined and a good speaker for example, he earns the best position. The fact that it is mostly men who seem to help out when building up the town with Joe, as the reader becomes familiar with more male names than female names and partakes of more conversations and thoughts by men than women, makes the town appear as male centered. Being the town mayor and having everybody look up to him, Joe tries to live up to a perfect facade which includes a perfect wife who is merely a beautiful ornament in his life. Janie functions as his trophy wife and should rather just stand quiet looking lovely in a corner than speak her mind or help out too much in the store they have opened. Joe is very traditional in the way that he wants to be in charge and he does not want his wife to participate too much in the town’s kinship.

Some time after Joe has died Tea Cake appears in town and he is the character who follows patriarchal structures the least. However, like Allan G. Johnson expresses: “…patriarchy is more than how people think, feel, and behave” (37). Johnson continues by discussing that “The prominent place of misogyny in patriarchal culture, for example, doesn’t mean that every man and woman consciously hates all things female” (41). His point is that everyone living in a patriarchal society is affected by it whether one notices it or not. This is applicable to Tea Cake because even though he does not follow patriarchal structures in the way Logan and Joe do he is still subconsciously affected by it. Tea Cake’s social status and social class in Eatonville are considered low, partly because he is not a dominant leader like Joe was. This can be seen both by the omniscient narrator who expresses: “Tea Cake and Mrs. Mayor Starks! All the men that she could get, and fooling with somebody like Tea Cake!” (Hurston 153) as well as when two of Janie’s friends are discussing Tea Cake: “De men wuz talkin’ ‘bout it in the grove tuhday and givin’ her and Tea Cake both de devil. Dey figger he’s spendin’ on her now in order tuh make her spend on him later” (Hurston 155). From these
quotes one can understand that Tea Cake is a bad choice, maybe the worst, for Janie to choose to spend time with. This is because the residents in Eatonville believe that Tea Cake has nothing to offer since he does not have much money or power which is crucial. They also think that because of this he only wants to take advantage of Janie and will leave her once he has taken what he wants.

From Janie’s point of view, her relationship with Tea Cakes is far more valued. His easy spirit and humorous personality are much appreciated by Janie whose former husbands were not like that at all and he makes Janie feel more relaxed than she has felt for a long time. He is a very charming man who represents freedom and if looking at Vladimir Propp’s analysis of characters, Tea Cake functions as “the helper” who helps Janie in her quest to develop into a more independent and confident woman.

Going back to patriarchy’s meaning which is “father rule”, this is something that defines Cholly in The Bluest Eye since he holds authority over Pecola as well as his son and wife. He is a man with low social status and social class, both from the view of society and his own family, but as Allan G. Johnson argues: “…male identification gives even the most lowly placed man a cultural basis for feeling some sense of superiority…” (9). Thus even though Cholly is not powerful in society he can still feel superior by dominating his family.

What the reader comes to know is that Cholly is an alcoholic who does not respect his family and abuses them. In the part of the plot which can be said to be the climax, he becomes so lost through his drinking and the fact that he does not seem to be capable of showing love that he rapes Pecola and as a result she becomes pregnant. In the end he dies alone in a workhouse without notice which shows how disregarded and disliked he was. He is undeniably controlling his family and this situation where he is dominant and his wife and children are oppressed is what Bowden and Mummery mean when they write that it is something naturalized by gender ideology. Thus the reason Cholly has most power in the family is partly because it is natural for men to be superior because of society’s attitude towards men being the leader and the one the rest of the family should obey, that is; father rule.
In addition to social structures, the identities of the male and female characters are formed due to factors such as their sex and gender, what is expected because of these, as well as the environment’s attitude towards skin color for instance. Some of the characters are more traditional than others who are more comfortable with breaking norms. West and Zimmerman writes that “Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men, differences that are not natural, essential, or biological” (137). What they mean by this is that some differences between men and women are socially constructed and that we keep maintaining these by for example dividing men and women up in areas where there are no natural reasons.

An example of this in Their Eyes Were Watching God is Logan whose opinion is that he, as a man, is supposed to work outside the house chopping wood for example while Janie, as a woman, should work inside the house cooking food. There is nothing saying that Janie is naturally better at cooking food, but for Logan this division is ordinary as women are often put in a domestic role due to society’s expectations. Generally speaking this view on marriage has always been standard; women should take care of the household and men should work and earn money. So since Logan seems to see Janie more as a housekeeper than a wife to love, he thereby contributes to keep standard gender roles because he is in charge in the relationship and gives Janie a domestic secondary role. However, Logan also thinks that Janie is spoiled and should be able to help him with other things so he does not appear to see her as incapable of doing hard work. Hence there are quite clear boundaries in their relationship of who should do what, but Logan is not harsh enough to prevent Janie from doing other things than just working in her main area which primarily is in the kitchen and other housework chores.

While Logan goes with the crowd without much reflection on the matter, Joe is more direct and shows early on that he believes in traditional gender roles where the social norms for women are to stand aside letting more capable people do the work. In the book Understanding Feminism Carole Pateman is cited saying that the differences between men and women in the private and public area are due to “the patriarchal reality of a social structure of inequality and the domination of women by men” (Bowden, Mummery 18). What she means by this is that the private area is considered secondary to the public area where “the realm of economic production and political decision-making, are more significant and
valuable than those of the private sphere of family nurturance and personal life”. (18) Thus since women are considered suitable for caring for others and do domestic chores they thereby become inferior to men who, like Joe, are considered appropriate for economy and politics which are regarded as more important. That Joe believes that Janie is not fit for important work like this, or at least not arduous work, can be seen in the scene where Joe and Janie first meet and one of the first things he says to her is: “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on the front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’taters dat other folks plant just special for you” (Hurston 41). This quote illustrates his view of how women should behave and be treated; beautiful women should not be committed to hard work, they should be handled with great care and enjoy the work of others. If looking at this scene and Joe in general from the view of how West and Zimmerman interpret gender, this difference regarding that Janie “is made to sit on the front porch” whereas other people are supposed to plant and harvest, is not something that is natural or biological. Janie is not “made” for anything different than everybody else is, that is just Joe’s conservative opinion.

An additional thought on the subject of gender roles is that it is not only women who are affected in a bad way due to what is excepted of them, such as that Janie for example is supposed to be passive and not be concerned with things that are not appropriate for her. The expectations on men can also put pressure on them to act in a particular way. West and Zimmerman mentions Cahill who on studies on children came to the supposition that when children are small they learn that there are only two social identities for them to belong to, either “baby” or “big boy”/“big girl”. This leads to that choosing to be a big boy or big girl is to choose to identify with only one of them and to behave in the correct manner because of that. The authors continue by discussing that boys learn that they belong to the ideal which implies “being able to affect the physical and social environment through the exercise of physical strength or appropriate skills” whereas “little girls learn to value ‘appearance’, that is, managing themselves as ornamental objects” (141). Since boys learn early on that they are the ideal they thereby obtain the image of being better than girls and already as children can feel superior to girls. However, apart from learning that they have the power to change things which might give them confidence, boys might also feel pressure to accomplish large tasks to live up to their role. Not all men have the same qualities or skills to make them achieve large things in society and not all men have the eagerness to do so. But since society expects this from men they might feel stressed to do things they do not want to and ignore or mistreat other people on their way to success.

To Joe for instance, success and power seem to be of great importance and this
might be reinforced because of the expectations on men to be powerful and gain high status. This in turn may lead Joe to feel stressed and being more inconsiderate than he otherwise would have been. So it is possible that without any expectations on men regarding them to be tough and authoritative, Joe would not have had the goal of becoming mayor and would have been a little more humble and tenderer towards Janie. On the other hand it is also possible that Joe would have had the same personality and behavior even without pressure from society.

Allan G. Johnson mentions qualities such as toughness, logic, forcefulness and decisiveness being “the cultural description of masculinity” (7). Joe can be said to possess these qualities along with being well-spoken and making people follow his orders and therefore he represents the image of masculinity. Throughout the plot both Janie and the reader become aware that these qualities help him achieve his goals. What he aims for is to be a vast part in Eatonville’s development. In his first encounter with Janie he expresses that “he had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin’ dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (Hurston 40). Joe believes that those who build things should govern it which in this case are African Americans building an incorporated all-black town. He seems confident that he truly will become a big voice and the following conversations with Janie are about when Joe will become a big ruler of things with Janie enjoying the benefits. Joe’s qualities have the highest value in Western society because social norms have always rewarded people who possess these and therefor it is not peculiar that Joe with his extroverted personality first raises a couple of eyebrows in the small population in Eatonville, but then gains most of their trust and eventually becomes the mayor of the town.

As the description of masculinity according to Allan G. Johnson refers to qualities such as “toughness”, Tea Cake might not be considered masculine by everyone with his easy-going personality. Additionally, Judith Butler argues in her book that gender and sex are both socially constructed and that masculine and feminine can signify both a female and male. Thereby Tea Cake’s personality might be considered feminine by society as he fits in Allan G. Johnson’s description of qualities such as cooperation, equality and compassion being “culturally associated with femininity and femaleness” (7). Because the fact is that Tea Cake appreciates equality and he has the most modern view of gender roles of the male characters. This can be understood when Tea Cake wants Janie to come and work with him for the reason that he wants them to spend more time together. He does not see her as his servant but as his companion and he does not order her to come or do things just because she is a woman, Janie does it out of her own free will. Even so, Tea Cake still has a stereotypical
manly role considering that he wants to provide Janie with food and clothes with the money he earns with the argument that he is the man and she is the woman, even though she has her own money. Thus in that respect he follows the expectations concerning that men should take care of “their” women. The difference is that he does not see Janie as an object, he lets her be her own person and by him doing so she is also able to grow as a person.

The fact that Tea Cake does not hesitate to teach Janie how to play checkers but thinks of it as ordinary to teach a woman, demonstrates yet again that his view on women is different from Janie’s previous husbands and that he has more modern values. That Tea Cake teaches Janie how to play the first time they meet is bewildering to her: “He set it up and began to show her and she found herself glowing inside. Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice” (Hurston 133). Instead of thinking that she is not clever enough to understand the game he actually says that “You looks hard tuh beat” (Hurston 133). He does not dismiss her from playing because she is a woman but instead think of it as ordinary. So in that respect Tea Cake makes Janie his equal by teaching her the rules and playing with her. In one way it is a quite a small gesture to teach someone a game but in this situation it has a greater significance. To Janie it means a great deal that someone actually wants to play with her, that she is included in something and is seen as a worthy opponent. She has watched people play before and appreciates the game but for the first time she can now enjoy being a part of it herself.

Another way in which Tea Cake differs from Janie’s past partners is that instead of standing in her way and stopping Janie from taking part in storytelling for example like Joe had done, Tea Cake lets Janie be a part of the entertainment. Their house becomes a gathering point for people who want to enjoy listening to Tea Cake playing the guitar, telling stories or playing games. In a scene where Janie is the focalizor she is thinking back on when she used to live in Eatonville with Joe. Her thoughts shows how much her life has changed and what a large impact Tea Cake has had on her; “The men held big arguments here like they used to do on the store porch. Only here, she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (Hurston 186). So it is still the men who have significant conversations although this time no man is stopping Janie from taking part in them. As her confidence grows she also begins to tell stories much to her own delight. One might think that it is not a big thing to tell stories but that is one among several things which help Janie find her voice, both literally and figuratively speaking. That is, she has not been “allowed” to talk much in the past because it was the men who should do the talking, but by telling stories she literally becomes more
accustomed to her voice and talking before others. It also helps her to find her voice figuratively speaking in the way that by talking and engaging with others she becomes more confident in who she is.

**Master Techniques**

As I mentioned in the previous section, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Joe follows traditional gender roles and by doing so sees himself as superior to Janie even though she does not fully accept this. She stands in the background of Joe and lets him run things, but on the inside she does not tolerate this and at one point she stands up for herself. But Joe demonstrates his command by being dominant over her, even when they are out in public. He also shows that he is dominant by downgrading her when he feels that she has not done something good enough even though she has done her best, or by ignoring her when she has something to say. This manner is sometimes called “Master Suppression Technique” which means that someone oppresses or humiliates someone else in order to retain a superior role. The term was developed by Professor Berit Ås and she identified five different techniques. These are “making invisible, ridiculing, withholding information, heaping blame and putting to shame and damned if you do and damned if you don’t”. Ås said that “they are used in specific combinations and situations in regards to women, due to the patriarchal society’s definition of women as objects or property” (*Master Suppression Techniques*). Thus these techniques have over time been a tool for men to use to keep their role as superior to women. However, even though they are mostly used by men they can also be used by other women.

The techniques I think can be best applied to the novels are ridiculing and making invisible. Ridiculing is when someone mocks and makes fun of a woman and her attempts and achievements. It also means when women are denoted as being especially emotional or sexual. This leads to the thought of women not being capable of anything but housework and sexual relations. The consequence of this can lead to women having lower self-esteem and lack of confidence. An example of ridiculing is in a scene that takes place in the store where Janie cuts tobacco wrongly. Joe is not late to react; he abruptly takes it away from her, cuts it the right way and says “I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusaleem and still can’t cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don’t stand dere rollin’ yo’ pop eyes at me wid yo’ rump hangin’ nearly to yo’ knees!” (Hurston 109). Although Janie does her best Joe stills mocks her attempt and instead of teaching her to cut it
correctly makes fun of her by ridiculing her in front of the customers.

Making invisible is when women are ignored or overlooked; that someone treats a woman as if she was not even there. By doing so it is easy for women to feel meaningless and unsure of themselves when they are not acknowledged the same way as men are. In the scene where Joe is made the mayor of town Janie is asked to make a speech, but before she has time to open her mouth Joe turns the attention towards himself and says “Thank yuh fuh yo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (Hurston 60). Here Joe can be said to use the technique of making Janie invisible because he ignores her by not permitting her to speak. Janie’s reaction is to try to laugh but she is not happy: “It must have been the way Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another that took the bloom off of things” (Hurston 60). Janie had not thought of giving a speech before, but just the notion of not been giving a chance to do so when she was asked makes her feel less happy about things. Preventing her from being truly glad for her husband, Joe makes Janie feel small and not important enough to stand by his side and say a few words to celebrate. Joe presumes Janie is not good at making speeches purely because she is a woman and his prejudices lie in traditional gender roles where men have always been giving more space to talk in arrangements such as meetings, decision-making etc. He does not stop to think that she could be a great speaker independent of the sex she was born into; he simply believes her place is in the home.

As I declared in the previous sections, traditional gender roles and a patriarchal society lie as a background for Joe’s behavior, but one can wonder why he carries on with this. It is very likely that Joe, like a big part of society, does not even notice that it is a problem with roles that one has to follow or else be excluded from the community or in other ways acquire problems. This is something that Maureen McKnight brings up in her article when she argues that Janie has to conform to what other people want her to do (95). She is controlled by others and if she stops following what is expected of her she might acquire problems or be excluded from the community.

Another way in which Joe shows his power over Janie is by deciding how she should look; he wants her to have a head-rag on when she is in the store. He does not tell her why but the reader understands through the omniscient narrator that it is because he becomes jealous when other men glance at her. Her long hair attracts attention so by forcing her to hide it he thinks he can stop other men from coming close to her. Thus Joe wants Janie to be beautiful but for his eyes only, she is there for him to admire and not anyone else.
When it comes to skin color and how whiteness plays a role in the black society in the novels there are three concepts that apply well. The first one is “intraracial racism” which is when racism is practiced within the black community, that is, when light-skinned black people are considered better than dark-skinned black people. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Mrs. Turner’s character has without doubt racist values and she and possibly others discriminate those in their African American community who have darker skin and more distinct African features. In her opinion dark skin color is a bad feature and she believes that people with lighter skin and more distinct European features such as herself and Janie possess are better. The fact that she rather goes to white doctors and says that “Colored folks don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no business” (Hurston 196) are examples of racism where she believes that darker-skinned people are less intelligent and reliable than lighter-skinned people. That she chooses who she wants to become friends with based on their appearance is also an example of intraracial racism: “That was why she sought out Janie to friend with. Janie’s coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair made Mrs. Turner forgive her for wearing overalls like the other women who worked in the fields” (Hurston 193). Mrs. Turner essentially believes Janie is a better person because of her lighter skin color and would rather associate with her than anyone who is darker.

The second concept is “internalized racism” which goes hand in hand with intraracial racism and it denotes when a black person feels inferior to white people; that he or she is not as intelligent or beautiful as they are. Mrs. Turner can again partly be used as an example as she suffers from internalized racism to some extent. Because even though she already thinks that she is more beautiful than the rest in town because she is lighter than them, she would likely have tried to become even lighter if it was possible since she believes the value of beauty and worth lies in the color of the skin. To her beauty is of great importance and she is determined to distance herself from the “negroes” in town and is proud that her features are more like those of white people. This obsession with declaring herself better than those who are darker than her seems to derive from the feeling of being inferior to white folks but she eagerly wants to claim that she at least is closer to being white than black.

Looking at Tea Cake, he is so to speak a victim of intraracial and internalized racism but not because he possesses these values himself, but rather is subjected to them by others. Despite being much appreciated for his personality and looks by Janie and most people
in town he is not approved by Mrs. Turner. She has very strong opinions about his appearance but believes she can change Janie into wanting a lighter and therefore better man; Mrs. Turner’s brother to be precise.

When comparing this to *The Bluest Eye* it is instead a child, namely Pecola, who is a victim of internalized racism. She wishes she was beautiful and to Pecola the word “beautiful” means to have white skin and blue eyes and she believes that everyone else thinks of beauty the same way. She acquires this feeling partly from experiencing how her mother treats the white girl she takes care of and how a white girl she goes to school with is perceived. Pecola eventually becomes so obsessed with the thought that her value lies in her skin color, the color of her eyes and that she is not considered pretty, that she finds a former priest now working as a “Reader, Adviser and Interpreter of Dreams” who she asks to turn her eyes blue. People who suffer from internalized racism often wish they were white and even though Pecola does not mention a desire for lighter skin color, she does hope to get blue eyes which is a feature more common among people with white skin color.

The third concept called “double consciousness” termed by W.E.B Du Bois, means that a person belongs to two different and conflicting cultures, one being the African American culture at home and the other being the white culture outside in schools or workplaces for example. Many African Americans thereby feel that they have two souls; one being the white European American and the other one being the black African American with different expectations accompanying the two. These two souls are then judged by each other and given a worth depending on society’s values and ideals.

I think double consciousness can to some extent be applied to Joe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because he at one point told Janie that white people were the ones who were in charge basically everywhere during this time. This meant all areas from workplaces to schools and the making of new regulations. Joe had himself only worked for white people all his life, so he belonged to the white culture when he was at work and the black culture when he was at home free to be himself. Thus by joining the construction of Eatonville he mostly just belongs to the African American culture both at home as well as at work and it is because of the absence of white folks that it is possible for Joe’s character to gain power. A problem with Eatonville however, is that since it is an incorporated all-black town it understandably makes the residents of the town separated from white inhabitants in other neighborhoods which might increase the problem with segregation.

In *The Bluest Eye* Pecola can also be said to experience double consciousness because she belongs to two different cultures with the African American culture at home and
the white culture in public places such as her school and in shops. In school she is teased for her skin color and she also experiences racism in other areas. When she steps into a shop to buy candy she feels invisible: “But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness” (Morrison 49). Thus Pecola’s lack of acknowledgment by her parents at home as well as that she registers that people do not have the same look in their eyes when they see her as they do when they see white folks, makes Pecola feel ugly because of her skin color. This leads to Pecola seeing herself through the eyes of the conflicting culture. That is, when she recognizes that people from the white culture treat her differently and do not appreciate her appearance because of her complexion and features, she starts to view herself in the same way as they do and gives herself a value based on that. This is exactly what signifies double consciousness; Pecola’s worth lays on society’s values and ideals.

Additionally there is a term called “intersectionality” which was first created by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a professor focusing on gender and race issues. She believes that one needs to consider when a person belongs to multiple rejected groups to fully understand how severe the experience of oppression is. In her essay Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics she argues that black women sometimes are excluded in studies of feminism as well as racism and that including them would not solve the problem because “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism” (140). Hence black women are not given the same amount of thought and are put to the side in discussions or studies on oppression which reinforces their role as a marginalized group.

The authors of the book Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy adhere to the same approach as Crenshaw when they state that “African American women constitute a group unto themselves and cannot simply be considered as subjects of African Americans or women” (106). As black women have to endure struggles concerning both gender and race it is inadequate to look at only one factor. Because of this the concept applies well to Pecola’s character for example as she is both African-American and female and just being female is not her only problem, as well as being black is not her only problem; she suffers from oppression in both areas. Pecola has to face oppression due to being black both by society and partly by her parents as they do not value their skin color highly and she also suffers oppression from being female by her father for instance. This makes the weight on her shoulders heavier than it would have been if she had only experienced oppression due
Beyond being mistreated by Cholly and in school, Pecola also experiences bad treatment by her mother. The fact is that Pecola’s mother seem to like the child she works as a caretaker for more than her own children, at least she treats the child more gently than she does Pecola. This is possible to see in a scene where Claudia is the narrator and she and Frieda has walked over to the house where Pecola’s mother works. They enter the house together with Pecola when the little girl who lives there comes in from another room. Pecola accidently tips over a pan with warm blueberries that burn her legs and when Pecola’s mother hears the children cry, she enters the room but hits Pecola instead of comforting her:

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 (Hurston 109).

Even though it was an accident and Pecola already was in pain from the warm juice, her mother became furious that Pecola created a mess and scared the small child. Rather than cheering up her daughter she demands them to leave and comforts the little girl instead: “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’” (Hurston 109). Pauline is more eager to comfort the little girl by using friendly words and a gentle touch than to give Pecola attention which is probably what she needs and wishes for. The reason for this might first of all be that Pauline has difficulties in showing love, but also that she gives the little girl greater importance due to her whiteness.

That the girl has a nickname for Pauline indicates that they have a closer relationship than Pecola has when she only refers to her mother by their last name. For Pecola it cannot be easy to hear and see that her mother rather choses to make another girl happy. To miss out on her mother’s love and realize that someone else acquires it instead is certainly something that might affect Pecola’s self-esteem, her view of herself and make her wonder why she is not as good as the light-skinned girl.

The novel ends with Claudia as a narrator who declares that Pecola in the end was driven to madness. Before that the reader follows a dialogue that Pecola presumably is having with herself but with an imagined voice in her head. In the dialogue she is accusing the other voice of being jealous of her eyes, asking the voice how blue her eyes are and is admiring them in the mirror. Pecola says that everyone is jealous of her eyes because when
she looks at them they look away. But as a reader it is possible to read between the lines that the reason why people do not want to look at her is because of what happened; that she was raped by her father and became pregnant. Not even her mother wants to look at her and the reason is probably that she is embarrassed, both for her own sake and Pecola’s due to the fact what Cholly did. In the dialogue Pecola is having with herself she also admits that she was raped a second time and that she did not feel it would do any good to tell her mother because she would not have believed her. She keeps repeating that it was horrible but that she does not need to be afraid of her father anymore. Thus talking to herself seems to be the only way for Pecola to express her thoughts and feelings and by doing so handle what happened.

**Sexual Violence and Self Hatred**

Aside from patriarchal structures and consequences of racism, there is also another reason for Cholly’s behavior in *The Bluest Eye* towards his family and that is based on sexual experiences. When Cholly was young he was humiliated together with a girl by two white men in a very intimate situation and instead of getting angry at the men he got angry at her: “Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long and painfully, he hated her so much (Morrison 148). Even though it was the men who made him feel uncomfortable and exposed, Cholly transferred his anger onto Darlene and thought it was her fault. Thus this dramatic experience effected how he came to see and treat women later in his life. This was the first time he was intimate with a girl and if the experience would have been lovely he most likely would have had a good state of mind when interacting with women, but because of what happened he came to link women into something shameful and without value that he then could take out his anger on. So as Cholly was humiliated by two men with more power and status than him because of their whiteness, Cholly turned his anger into women who have less power and status than himself. This is undoubtedly part of the reason why he abuses his wife; it makes him feel that he at least has control over her, something he did not have in the incident when he was young.

Cholly was not in actual fact raped in the incident with Darlene when he was a teenager but it is nonetheless possible to call what he experienced a form of sexual abuse. This because Cholly and Darlene did not want to continue but were forced to do so by the two men who discovered them and who then stayed and watched and laughed at them. Therefore I
think it is valid to consider if data on sexual abuse and its effects is applicable to Cholly.

Gillian Mezey who is an expert on domestic and sexual violence writes in one of her articles that “there is some evidence that male survivors are more likely to react by projecting their anger outwards”. She continues by saying that “specific problems of male survivors include confusion and anxiety over sexual identity, inappropriate attempts to assert masculinity and repetition of the victimization experience, either as victims or perpetrators” (Watkins and Bentovim, 1992). Because Cholly gives the impression of being a man who does not keep his anger on the inside, but instead shows it by taking it out on his wife for example by assaulting her, he definitely shows signs of problems with aggression that could be a consequence of being a victim in the past. He also fits the description of trying to advance his masculinity in ways that are bad for others and not appropriate. An example of this is when he dominates his wife and children and beats them – things that makes him feel strong and powerful but hurts them both physically and mentally. Additionally I would say that raping Pecola is to some extent a repetition of the victimization experience. The reason being that he makes Pecola experience something sexual that is hurtful, shameful and awful; just like the incident he experienced. The difference is that she is abused by a family member she should be able to trust whereas he was abused by two strangers.

In an article written by Elizabeth Hartney who has a PhD in psychology, she names several reasons why people who have been sexually abused might become abusers themselves. Some of the reasons are that they feel inadequate, it is a search for power and control and that they feel very angry (The Cycle of Sexual Abuse). It is useful to draw parallels between these three reasons and Cholly. That Cholly feels inadequate could derive from things such as the feeling of not being good enough ever since he was abandoned as a baby. He might think that his parents rejected him and then assume that no one else would want him either. The fact that he cannot take care of and provide for his family as men otherwise are supposed to do might also make him feel insufficient because that means he has failed in his “role as a man”, that is, being a provider for the family. Furthermore, Cholly is a black man in a society that is governed by white men which automatically gives him low status. Since he cannot achieve power in society due to the fact that he is African American he searches for power and control in his home instead by being dominant.

By letting the reader know what happened to Cholly in his earlier life the text makes it possible to get an understanding for him as a character, it does not suggest acceptance for his actions but it does provide an explanation. Cholly lived with his aunt (who later died) growing up and he thereby missed out on the love from his parents. He did not
have a role model until he quit school and met a man named Blue. This absence of a real family growing up almost certainly affected Cholly and his relationship to the family he got when he became an adult. Not being raised by his parents he lacks experience when it comes to love within a family and these emotions are therefore not something that comes easily or naturally for him. As a consequence Cholly’s perception of not feeling loved has made it hard for him in turn to love others. Thus maybe when he does feel a strong emotion he turns it into anger and abuse instead of love. It might be that he is afraid of opening up and being vulnerable, because being vulnerable is to take a risk of becoming hurt and being hurt and suffering is not something that is considered masculine.

When Cholly rapes Pecola he feels strong emotions and does not think clearly. He somehow confuses the way Pecola touched her feet when doing the dishes, with the first moment he met Pauline who did the same, then his emotions become mixed up and after he rapes her he becomes full of confusion: “Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her (Morrison 163). Even though it is his own daughter he has just raped which he to a certain degree understands is wrong, he cannot escape from feeling hatred. His contempt for women is so strong that not even an innocent child created from his own flesh and blood can stop him. The reason for this is that he has lived with the hate for so long that it has become a part of his personality. But at the same time he does not rape her only because of loathing, some part of him does it out of affection even though it is the wrong way to show it. When he sees Pecola standing in the kitchen he thinks that she is beautiful and wants to be near her, but instead of doing so with a fatherly hug for example, his love turns into lust which becomes an unacceptable action.

**Conclusion**

With the research I have done on the novels I have arrived to the conclusion that the male characters with reinforcement from society play a large role in the oppression of the female characters. The men follow social structures that have existed for a long time; structures that they have grown up with as children and that continue to exist until people recognize them and thereby change and improve things. An example I have mentioned is patriarchy where men are considered greater than women and thereby achieve better positions and gain higher status. This leads to naturalized gender roles where it is normal for women to attain roles that
are not regarded as equally important as the ones men acquire since women are not considered good enough for anything but a domestic role.

It is difficult to determine which oppression that is strongest; family or society, because they both influence the female characters. I think it might be easier for Janie and Pecola to realize when someone in their family is oppressing them because then the oppression has an actual face and is more concrete. When they experience oppression from society they are almost certainly not the only ones and therefore it might be harder to realize that it is not acceptable because it seem so common. Either way, both areas of oppression weigh heavy on the protagonists. I have showed that in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* it is mostly Janie’s ex-husbands Logan and Joe who suppresses her and in *The Bluest Eye* Pecola has to endure oppression from both her parents and the whole of society.

Logan and Joe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Cholly in *The Bluest Eye*, do not seem to be fully aware that they follow social structures and because of this they do not see how much this affects the female characters and society as a whole. They might not realize that they are holding the women back by downgrading them and being prejudiced, instead of being open to changes which would help the women to develop both at home in the private area as well as in the public area in workplaces, politics etc. In addition to social structures, I have also argued that previous experiences in life, such as Cholly experiencing sexual abuse, is also a reason for oppression because it makes Cholly transfer his anger onto other characters such as Pecola.

As I discussed under the section “Gender Roles and Society’s Expectations”, women are not the only ones being victims of roles that are forced upon one, men are affected by these to. People are not all born with the same personality so therefore they do not all fit into the same model of how one is supposed to act. This might make some characters like Joe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for instance even more dominant than he would have been if it had not been expected of him as a man. When he becomes the town mayor he has an image as authoritative to live up to as well as being a role model which likely reinforces his eagerness to do great work to be seen as good mayor.

When it comes to race issues they are noticeable in both novels because both plots takes place during a time period where whiteness was viewed better than blackness and where segregation and discrimination were two existing problems. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* I determined that Tea Cake was the main target for racist opinions whereas Pecola was the one suffering most in *The Bluest Eye*.

Thus the answer to my central question is that together with racism and social
structures, the majority of the male characters which includes Logan and Joe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Cholly in *The Bluest Eye* play a large part in the oppression of the female characters by being dominant and superior. This reinforces the female characters’ roles as being secondary and submissive. The only exception is Tea Cake who values equality more and therefore is more humble compared to the other three men.
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