Haleigh Pannell

Dr. Robert Lynch

English 203-03

April 14, 2017

The United States of America is often referred to as a melting pot of multiple ethnicities, but that diversity does not always mix, and sometimes members of the minority feel caged in by stereotypes and prejudice. African-Americans have spent hundreds of years in literal chains around their bodies and figurative ones around their minds. These withholdings are exemplified in August Wilson’s play *Fences*, Toni Morrison’s novel The Bluest Eye, and Countee Cullen’s poem “Incident” through the struggles in being caged in by stereotypes and racism. Presidential Medal of Freedom winner Marian Wright Edelman once spoke that “it is utterly exhausting being black in America- physically, mentally, and emotionally… there is no respite or escape from your badge of color”. The black community is discouraged from living the same life as the rest of Americans simply for their race, which explains the mental difficulty and sometimes destruction represented in these three works.

The seemingly endless cycle of degradation and discrimination against the black community, has created a ‘glass ceiling’ for the members in which they feel they can never win. Initial introduction of Africans into America was through slavery; an oppression that killed the mind, body, and soul of millions of people. Even when there was thought to be the light at the end of a severely dark tunnel in the Emancipation Proclamation, the newly free slaves soon learned that it was just the opening of a new, nevertheless dark tunnel. Countless times in America’s history, African-Americans were subjugated to feel as if they weren’t even human, just property or an object. The demeaning labelling of blacks as 3/5ths of a human, was a mental attack a lot of the community has passed through generations. Jim Crow Laws that degraded blacks to a lesser stance of the community where they could not even walk on the same side of the sidewalk, they couldn’t even make eye contact with whites. The derogatory mindset of Americans towards blacks has created a defeatist mindset for the black community that created a cycle of self-hatred.

Playwright August Wilson grew up during the mid-1900s, arguably the most segregated centuries in American history since there was residual anger and negative opinions towards the black community. *Fences* was quintessential in the explanation of how black people feel imprisoned by their race and historical stance. The protagonist Troy embodies a perfect example of feeling trapped because he is black. For all his short comings in life; not being able to play in the majors, working as a garbage man, combined to not allow him to make any advancement in life. In his argument with his wife Rose, Troy admits that he has been “standing in the same place for 18 years (Wilson 70)”. He has done nothing to try to improve himself because his father never taught him to break the mold, and in turn, he does not show his son Cory that he could either. Troy’s refusal to sign a form, giving his permission for Cory to play college ball, was the prime example of the caged thinking that blacks will always be withheld from chances and wronged by society. His own self-hatred and negative relationship to his father drove his unemotional relationship to his son, making Cory question, “Home come you ain’t never like me? (Wilson 37)”. Troy’s response was that family is an obligation not a joy, so he has no need to like him, when most parents would say that having a family is the greatest joy in the world. The continuation of depressive outlook on life has hindered growth in the black community, explaining why Troy could not develop into whole person.

Like Wilson, Toni Morrison spent her developing times in the later mid end of the 1900s where she as a black woman found that she had two strikes against her; race and gender. Malcom X described black women as “the most disrespected… unprotected… neglected person in America”. In the foreword of the novel, Morrison describes gender and race as “damaging forces” for the self-esteem of a person. Following the main character Claudia’s confusion as to why she isn’t considered beautiful and Pecola’s unrealistic desire to have blue eyes, shows the ones who “collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it (Morrison x)” leading to the “death of self-esteem (Morrison x)”. Pecola’s mental deuteriation was a product of her parent’s inability to love themselves which led to their unsympathetic, neglectful, and unloving parenting style. The Breedloves had a cycle of deterioration of spirit after a traumatic event; Cholly after he was forced to have sex with a girl while white men cheered them on, Polly when she accepted that she was ugly and unloved by her husband, and Pecola after she was raped and impregnated by her father and blamed by her mother for the episode. Claudia remarked that “this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers… and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live (Morrison 206)”. America’s soil can be thought of as bad for the seeds that are black people, because it has caused blacks to have stunted growth, with not enough sunshine to help them grow, and it has been that way since they first arrived as slaves, and it has taken a very slow increase in potential.

To be black in America is to be born into a world where part of your heart gets chipped at when you are very young, this experience is explained in Countee Cullen’s “Incident”. Relating back to Morrison, she says that “the destruction of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before there ego has ‘legs’… (Morrison x)”. In this poem, Cullen states that the eight-year-old who is innocent and has a positive outlook on the world, gets crushed by the experience of someone calling them a nigger. The child becomes scarred from the event remarking that; “from May to December… that’s all I could remember (Cullen)”, for seven whole months this poignant incident could not be erased nor ignored. It was the stain to the entire visit to Baltimore causing a stain on the way they will see the world for the rest of their life. One incident led to the disassembling of this child’s innocence and introducing them to the world in which they are hated and discriminated against for their appearance.

The systematic degradation of the black community was well represented in these three works as they show the struggle of feeling that one does not belong in the world because the majority makes them feel that way. Throughout these works, placed in the mid-1900s, the unacceptance of black Americans by white Americans launched an attack on their mental state. This continuation of feeling like they are less, held blacks in a caged mindset that they felt they could not escape. The only way to eliminate this feeling is to destroy prejudice and racism, which is a task that is impossible in that day and age and still today. Hopefully there will be a day where blacks don’t have to walk around with a chipped at heart, and a stain on their perspective of the world.

Works Cited

Cullen, Countee. "Incident." *Poem Hunter*. N.p., 27 Oct. 2011. Web.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Vintage International, 1970. Print.

Wilson, August. *Fences*. New York: Plume, 1986. Print.