

## Beauty: A tragic reality of racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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### Abstract

For a long time beauty has been a popular subject for writing, every person and society, because culture has its own views on the concept of beauty. Measurement of beauty is not certainly confirmed since it depends on how a person looks and assume. It is considered to be in the eyes of beholder but society and environment can change the standards of what is viewed as beauty. In Afro-American culture this racialised beauty has detrimental effects in the lives and relations of the people. The purpose of this paper is to discuss, and analyze the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison in terms of beauty and race, two very prominent themes in the novel. It is obvious that the girls in Morrison's novel are too young, as they grow; they come to know about real beauty and the very 'ugly' truth of race relations in terms of binary opposites in the rural South of the 1940s. White people may be 'beautiful' on the outside as Pecola believes, but many of them are ugly and hateful on the inside as Morrison clearly illustrates, and that is one of most important lessons what this novel offers. Anyone can be beautiful on the outside, but it is the interior of a person – their soul and heart – that really matter as Morrison shows in *The Bluest Eye*.

**Keywords:** beauty, blue eyes, blacks, whites, racism

### Introduction

Toni Morrison, one of the major literary figures in contemporary Afro-American literature, was awarded the Nobel Prize for her outstanding contribution to English literature. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a very well-known manuscript which has this sort of beauty as its theme. Morrison challenges Western norms of beauty and presents the concept of beauty that is socially constructed. Morrison also reveals that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished. *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of an eleven year old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wants to have blue eyes, because she sees herself, and is regarded by most of the characters in the novel as ugly. The novel examines the tragic effects of imposing white American ideals of beauty on the developing female identity of Pecola during the early 1940s. Toni Morrison demonstrates how such social standard defines little black girl's perspective, making people of colour feel weak. The novel initially brings up the predicament of a black woman in the predominantly white American society in 1930's and 1940's, since it was the time of racial tensions which were evident and extreme. At that time, the standard of white colour's people is set that black and white are unequal and will never be equal in every aspect of living.

Pecola Breedlove is an example of the damaged appearance who is deficiently surrounded by the standard of beauty, a criterion is being raised up in a community where black are considered as inferior. The standard of beauty that her peers subscribe is represented by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes. It keenly shows the psychological devastation of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who searches for love and acceptance in a world

that denies and devalues people of her own race. She is a neglected, abused and even hated child. She and everyone around her think that she is ugly and useless. However Pecola thinks that she has found the cure for her ugliness. If she were granted her wish for blue eyes she would certainly be regarded as beautiful. Pecola is subjected to racism both within her own race and by whites.

Pecola's belief that she will become loveable through changing her appearance; it is indeed evidence of racial self-hatred. Pecola firmly believes that only blue eyes can be remedy for her distracted condition. She is very lonely and shunned girl and the most important reason for her desire for blue eyes is that she wants to be treated differently by her family. There is an excerpt in the volume that exemplifies this 'If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say', 'Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.'"(Morrison 44)

This clearly indicates that her primary concern is to escape from negligence which is in the home. She knows that little girls with blue eyes are admired and adored so she wants to live up to that image. Morrison further supports, "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sight if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different, as say that those eyes are all Pecola will ever want in her lifetime, once in a blue moon, she just yearns for an acknowledgement.'"(Morrison 46)

The feelings of ugliness drive oneself to a "persistent childhood fantasy" (Rosenberg 439) that she might one day wake up blond and blue-eyed. To put simply, black people are struggling against the imposed standards by white-dominated

society, and they (black persons) are trying to root their own paradigm of self-esteem, adeptness, and well-being. In order to emphasize how hard Pecola tries to reach the social standard of being white, Morrison describes, "Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named, smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort.... To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane," (Morrison 50).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Morrison conveys the destructive steps in which a black young girl takes in order to conform to the idealized image of white beauty. No doubt, Pecola surrounds herself with the belief that one day she will be like Jane. Even when she chooses the candy, "she picks Mary Jane's candy, not because of its taste, but because of its packaging bearing a picture of blonde, blue-eyed, beautiful Mary Jane. Above all, Pecola believes that she is one step closer to Mary Jane by consuming whiteness." (Bloom 90)

Another devastating effect of such concept of beauty is an incident at Mrs. Breedlove's workplace which starts Pecola's journey from being a disturbed little girl to insanity. While Mrs. Pauline Breedlove is collecting the laundry Pecola suddenly knocks over a blueberry cobbler. Instead of solacing Pecola Mrs. Breedlove scolds her. Mrs. Breedlove hits her and comforts the Fisher girl. Even the fact that white girl can call her Polly while Pecola has to call her Mrs. Breedlove symbolizes the mother's preference for the white girl.

Furthermore, the incident also symbolizes that Pauline does not want to acknowledge that Pecola is her daughter: "Pick up that wash and get out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up...." As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and- yellow girl.... "Who were they Polly?" "...Hush don't worry none," she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake."(Morrison 107)

Pecola is already a disappointed girl and once again she gets proof that she is not loved and is unwanted. What finally pushes Pecola over the edge of insanity is being raped by her own father and becoming pregnant by him. In this way Morrison protests against racism and shows that racism and oppression do not exist in the moment. The person who is subjected to them internalizes the shame and bitterness and when those feelings are let out other people will be hurt. They will perhaps in return continue the vicious circle. We can say that Mr. Breedlove rapes Pecola, her own daughter, because during Cholly's first encounter with sex, a natural human experience is perverted by two white hunters. "There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it."(Morrison 145)

This dehumanizing experience creates within Cholly a hatred for women which is demonstrated later in the novel by his domestic violence toward his wife and the molestation of his daughter. Mrs. Breedlove is equally responsible for betrayal and that may be equal to Mr. Breedlove's. Pecola has told her about the rape but Mrs. Breedlove did not believe her. Pecola speaks to her imaginary friend after she has gone insane:

"I wonder what it would be like.

Horrible.

Really?

Yes. Horrible.

Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?

I did tell her!

I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.

I wasn't sleeping! I was reading!

You don't have to shout.

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.

So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?

She wouldn't have believed me either.

You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you."(Morrison 198)

Pecola's pregnancy reveals the cruelty and irresponsibility not only of parents but also of the community towards black lives. Morrison foreshadows on Pecola's pregnancy as stated: "We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt." (Morrison 10)

The community feels no compassion for Pecola and offers her no help. Pecola is forced to leave school because of her pregnancy and is isolated from other children; moreover, she becomes a subject of gossip by the adults. As Morrison explains, "They were disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, or even excited by the story. But we listened to the one who would say, "Poor little girl," We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils." (Morrison, 190)<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Pecola is being recognized as "'the other' owing to the facts that a standard of beauty, that a society applied, condemns her to an extreme ugliness." (Bloom 86)

Analytically, the community exposed how unequal they are in terms of giving a kid with basic education and healthcare; Pecola's child is another indirect repercussion of failure in community's standard, disclosing the disadvantages of being black. Unfortunately, the child died: the whole reflection on ignorance toward two black lives even they are female and kids.

Black population has been shown to live in a much poorer habitat—major drawback that black people always long for unconditional fairness. At her final stage of life, she despised herself because she doesn't meet the requirement of getting accepted according to white standards. Without social acceptance, Pecola starts creating her own society in her madness and escapes to the world where she is beautiful, a world of pure imaginary wholeness. Her fantasy builds her own community, separating her from cruelty she encounters in real life, thereby succeeding in protecting her from pain. In her insane state, Pecola, finally, "obtains the object of her desire the blue eyes." (Harold 86)

## Conclusion

In distinction to Pecola, Morrison demonstrates that there is an action to challenge the white beauty construction through the character of Claudia. She struggles to change the perception of ideal beauty of the Whites which often acknowledges that beautiful means those who are blue-eyed, blonde-haired, and white-skinned, into the perception that the Blacks also deserve to be identified as beautiful. To convey her message, she tries to adore her blackness and poverty, but still, all the things she have done does not contribute significantly to change the

White beauty construction in that era. The power holder of the society is still the Whites; which makes it impossible for Claudia to challenge the power of dominance in her surround. Morrison challenges Western norms of beauty and presents that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison also reveals that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished.

### References

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