

The Quest for an Ideal Beauty in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

In *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the American-African writer, Toni Morrison explores how Western standards of ideal beauty are created and propagated with and among the black community. The novel not only portrays the lives of those whose dark skinned and Negroid features blight their lives; it also shows how the standard of white beauty, when imposed on black youth, can drastically damage one's self-love and esteem which usually occurs when beauty goes unrecognized. Morrison in this novel focuses on the damage that the black women characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a racialised society where whiteness is used as a standard of beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*¹ (1970), Toni Morrison addresses a timeless problem of white racial dominance in the United States and points to the impact it has on the life of black females growing up in the 1930's. Morrison started writing the novel in the mid of 1960s, but the idea was lodged twenty years earlier when one of her classmates revealed a sorrowful secret that she had been praying to God for two years to give her blue eyes but receiving no answer.² Morrison wrote this novel when the "Black is beautiful"³ slogan of movement was at the peak. She started to think why such movement was needed, " why although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community? Why did it need wide public articulation?" (p. 3)

If an individual or group is constantly being put down, and told that they are not good enough, they themselves begin to believe it. "In centering her story on an ordinary girl who is taught by her colorist culture that she is ugly, Toni Morrison portrays the cruel ground which forecloses Pecola's longing to be loved."⁴ For Pecola's family, the Breedloves, life was just one disappointment after another. Poor, black, and ugly left them little room for self-improvement. The Breedloves made their home in a storefront and,

They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly...Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness was behavior, the rest of the family- Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove- wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. (p.38)

This ugliness that did not belong to them was always shadowing their lives; everywhere they looked the society shone back at them like a giant mirror portraying nothing but hideousness, a hideousness resulting from society's prejudice and harsh standards. Where and why these standards came from is as difficult to answer as why the Breedloves were ugly; it can never be wholly understood. Morrison says that:

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You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. (p.39)

The ideal beauty that is the standard for the black characters and which is unattainable for them is physical. It is described as being white blonde, blue-eyed, keen nose, and thin lips. Accordingly, the African must be ugly and this is the type of logic that the Breedloves use to convince themselves of. Certainly such beauty is unattainable for coloured people and as Paul C. Taylor argues, "Certainly such beauty is less possible for women of colour than for white women to achieve this ideal".⁵

The self destruction caused by the quest for an ideal beauty in this novel is apparent from the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* as Morrison prefaces the text with a primer that traditionally stands for the American ideal. *The Bluest Eye* opens with the Dick and Jane story that most children were familiar with in the late 1940s and 1950s, "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane" (p. 6). The Dick and Jane image is important to mention because of the symbolic role the primer had on America during this time, and to recognize that the ideas it incorporates play a part in Pauline (Pecola's mother) and Pecola's lack of self-worth. Timothy Powell's article "Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page" shows the primer's ability to bring about the effect of white standards in the life of coloured women and how someone else's standards determines one's self-worth, and the destruction that causes:

The Dick-and-Jane primer comes to symbolize the institutionalized ethnocentrism of the white logos, of how white values and standards are woven into the very texture of the fabric of American life. And for the protagonist of Toni Morrison's first novel, Pecola Breedlove, it is precisely these standards which will lead to her tragic decline⁶.

For Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, these outside forces cause them to underestimate their own value and encourage their self-destruction. Black women of the period are depicted in *The Bluest Eye* as having internalized "assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze"⁷.

To recognize the significance of Toni Morrison's writing for the African-American community and its women, Darlene Clark Hine writes in *Black Women in America encyclopedia*: "In her works, [Toni Morrison] strips away the idols of whiteness and of Blackness that have prevented Blacks in the United States from knowing themselves and gives them their own true, mythical, remembered words to live by"⁸. According to the color of one's skin, people are split up into two categories of beautiful and ugly. This novel shows that this is the only standard by which the Western culture evaluates its people.

The quest for an ideal beauty has devastating effect on Pauline, Pecola's mother. Pauline's life is already spoiled in her eyes when as a child she steps on a nail and her foot is left deformed. After she marries Cholly, their life in Lorain, Ohio, does not turn out to be the fairy tale she expected, so she alleviates her loneliness by going to the movies. Pauline is an example of a character whose ideal of beauty rests with a

distorted image of whiteness, which in her case is seen through the movie screen .There, she is introduced, as the novel states, to the ideas of physical beauty and romantic love, and those ideas were "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (p.122). Pauline indulges in the fantasy world she views in the theatres, even going so far as to wear her hair like the popular white actress Jean Harlow.

The silver screen and those who perform on it define much of what is considered beautiful in America. "The movies are the primary vehicle for transmitting these images for public consumption."⁹ Those characters symbolize beauty and happiness as well as cleanliness to escape her shortcomings .In the light of colorist ideas, black people form the most disadvantaged segment of society. They have to countervail the prejudiced misunderstanding of the inaccessibility of education with vulgarity, of their poverty with filthiness ¹⁰ . Pauline chooses to ignore that beautiful color imagery that is a part of her own experiences:

I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out the fields. It be cool and yellowish . . . And that streak of green them June bugs made on the trees . . . All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. (p.115)

These ideas of ideal beauty only produce self-hatred in individuals who cannot match up. Shirley Temple, an adorable white child-star of 1930s, allowed audiences to see a perfect world and a perfect happy little girl, something "a black woman leading a poverty stricken existence could not even begin to imagine"¹¹. Pauline's illusion is broken when she loses a tooth while eating candy at a movie. From then on, she "settled down to just being ugly". Her physical disfigurement drives her to view the human body at its higher degree of perfection. Morrison provides further details:

In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. [...]She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty. (p.122)

She always blames her problems on her foot: "Her general feeling of separateness and unworthiness she blamed on her foot" (p. 111). But what she fails to understand at first is that because of her color she is considered disfigured with or without an injured foot. She uses the foot to ignore the fault that others are seeing in her, which is the color of her skin. She is not noticed and is not important to others because she does not fit into the Western standard of beauty. She is continuously defeated by her surrounding and she transfers this heritage of ugliness and self-hatred to her daughter Pecola.

Pauline later on finds a job working for a white family ,the Fishers , so that she can have the "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" absent from her own family. Pauline cannot find these attributes in her daily life, and she both envies the family she cares for and admires them at the same time. This family signifies for her the life she longes to lead, and the white beauty she could never obtain. In her employers' household, "Mrs. Breedlove's skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets and brilliant copperware" (p. 107). She is surrounded by beauty and feels as if she is a part of it. She wants this order rather

than the chaos and uncontrolled environment her home life provides, even as she wanted order and perfection in her childhood. Pauline's need for order is evident because "[w]hatever portable plurality she found, she organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape, or gradations of color" (p.111). She seems to reject the fact that the Western tradition of beauty and perfection leaves her at almost the lowest level of this ordering. She takes orders from them and is honored by what she sees as their justification of her existence, even though it is not justification of her person, but her role as their servant.¹²

She loves the little girl of the Fishers more than she loves her own children because this child is beautiful. For example, when Pecola knocks a hot pie off the counter at the Fisher's home, Pauline slaps and verbally abuses her because she disrupts her clean, white world; on the other hand, she comforts the weeping Fisher girl who is startled by the incident "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger abused Pecola directly ..." (p. 109). This rejection of Pecola's pain is only emphasized as Pauline soothes the white child's fears, "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (p. 109). The intimacy of this scene only restates Pauline's role in Pecola's destruction. She sees her mother giving the love and attention that should be hers to a girl that fits the picture of ideal beauty, something she can never achieve. Whereas this girl and her family call Pauline "Polly" affectionately, Pecola calls her Mrs. Breedlove because there is no personal relationship between mother and child.¹³

Pauline is a role model for Pecola's acceptance of the Western ideals, rather than a black woman happy with her life trying to help her daughter break out of this tradition of servitude. Before her birth, Pauline would talk to Pecola in the womb and treat her as a mother should. She begins to form bonds expected of mother and daughter, but these disappear when Pecola is born. She dismisses Pecola as soon as she sees her; "But I knowed[sic] she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (p.126). Pauline cannot give her daughter unconditional love because she judges Pecola by her physical beauty, and Pecola does not pass the test. This is an obstacle that Pecola can never overcome because she cannot change the color of her skin. It is ironic that Pauline dismisses her, because the "ugly" child came from her and Cholly. The looks of the child only confirm her own insecurities about her looks, and this distances her from Pecola even more.

In a similar way as her mother, Pecola comes to the conviction that she is worthless the way she looks and unless she alters her ugliness, she will remain ignored and despised by the teachers and classmates at school. She finds the only possible solution in acquiring some of the white features: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that [...] if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (p. 34)

Pecola and Pauline's belief in their own ugliness, strengthened by what they are told, what they see, and what they read, cannot be dismissed, because others will not let them forget it, as Pauline "[t]hrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (p. 46-7). Both woman and child live in a world that recognizes them as less than secondary citizens. What makes it worse is that they are teased with an ideal that they are not allowed to reach, they themselves don't attempt to shape an attainable goal. Instead they believe others, and are unwilling and, in some sense, unable to help themselves.¹⁴

Pecola longs for blue eyes because she believes people would be kinder to her if she was pretty and they would not do dirty things in front of her. To her, blue eyes are

a symbol of beauty and she longs for them so much to the extent it drives her to insanity.

In this novel, ugliness is attributed to poverty and blackness, as in the case of the Breedloves. The family features, as described in the book can be contrasted with the description of a doll to demonstrate the beauty scale. As a manifestation in Western thinking of an inner ugliness, a spiritual and moral failure, if not an innate evil: that which was 'white' (or Anglo, male, Christian, wealthy) was having connotations of benevolence and superiority. While that which was not white (or not Anglo, female, non-Christian, poor) was debased and associated with malevolence and inferiority 15 :

They were poor and black [...] their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly. [...] Their eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low irregular hairlines, [...], heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked nosed, with insolent nostrils. (p.28)

The 'ugly' conviction directly affected Pecola. "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, but teachers and classmates alike" (p. 46). Not only was she reduced to believing that she was ugly because her family believed that they were all ugly, she was detested and teased at school. There is a scene in the story where some of the boys, who are black too, in her school are making fun of her on the playground by calling her black and talking about how her father sleeps naked. That shows that not all of the racist acts and attitudes in the novel are by whites. This is one of the instances in the novel that involves racism among black characters. However, Pecola mistakes their teasing for something personal, rather than as a manifestation of what the ideal beauty has done to the mentality of the race as a whole. "That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth," the text reads, and then goes on to describe how this behavior was fueled by their "cultivated ignorance" and "self-hatred" (p. 65). But because Pecola believes that her own ugliness was the cause of the teasing, she suffered from self-pity. She believes that "if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different...If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly, Pecola's father, would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove, too" (p. 46).

In her article, "Re-membling the Body: Body Politics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak states that the "pervasiveness of images projecting physical perfection reflects the subtle workings of ideology: as we learn this language, we become part of the social order"¹⁶. Thus apparently Pecola is bombarded with images whereby she learns that as long as she is black, she is not entitled to be beautiful, to be loved, or to rise up out of poverty. Like her mother, Pecola has the conviction that she is ugly, because she has "support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (p.39). For example, one day as Pecola, the MacTeer girls (Claudia and Frieda), and Maureen Peal walk home from school, they pass the Dreamland Theater seeing the faces of Betty Grable and Hedy Lamarr looming at them on an advertisement/billboard. Because Pecola and the MacTeer girls do not reflect Western standards of beauty, the name of the theater is a clever remark pointing out that only in the girls' dreams could they look like Grable and Lamarr or have the lifestyle they lead. The girls have learned via these visible icons and others that "One's visibility depends upon one's beauty"¹⁷

Desperately wanting to become visible and worthy, many characters in this novel feel compelled to imitate actresses' looks. Pecola, however, does not want to merely imitate the beauties she sees on advertisements; she literally wants to be one of the Shirley Temples of the world. While staying at the MacTeer home, Pecola drinks cups of milk, not because she is thirsty, but because she wants to drink out of the Shirley Temple cup. She wants not to consume what is inside, but Temple herself. Pecola craves the attention that Shirley Temple's "cu-ute"ness demands (p.19). In her mind, if she could become Shirley Temple, her parents might love her, her teachers and classmates might pay attention to her and perhaps like her, and people might *see* her.

Pecola Breedlove, the 12-year-girl and one of the heroines in this novel desires to change her appearance so that not to be despised by others and that reflects on her ugliness as the source of her misery and on her blackness as the origin of other people's hatred:

“The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes” (p. 37).

Not only do other adults show their lack of interest in Pecola, but it is striking that her own mother finds her ugly and develops a more caring relationship between her and a white girl child from the household she is helping at. Because of her weakness and lack of confidence, Pecola becomes an easy victim even for her black schoolmates' bullying:

“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 all up into a fiery cone of scorn” (p. 50).

Pecola's presence in *The Bluest Eye* really is the absence of her original identity. Malin LaVon Walther asserts that “Pecola's ugliness, defined visually by white standards, forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode of presence”¹⁸. Very few people in the novel see Pecola. In fact, they spend much of their time not looking at her. At one point in the novel, Mrs. MacTeer even refers to Pecola as *something*, not someone (p.24). Perhaps this is because Pecola hides behind her ugliness, “peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask” (p.39). John Bishop argues that even Pecola's name is a phonic play on the fact that she is absent. At one point, Maureen Peal, Pecola's schoolmate, inquires if Pecola is named after the character in *Imitation of Life*. Bishop points out that the main character's name in the film is Peola, not Pecola. Bishop shows that the misnaming is crucial to understanding characters' reactions to Pecola. He claims that people cannot see Pecola because only the “pretty, pale Peola [in movie titled *Imitation of Life*] is deemed worthy of notice—they do not *c* the real girl” (p.254). One could further argue that the title of the film, *Imitation of Life*, is a pun, emphasizing that Pecola unsuccessfully attempts to be/imitate others, yet remains invisible throughout the novel.¹⁹

Another instance where Pecola's presence is absence is when she goes to Mr. Yacobowski's store to purchase Mary Jane candies. Mr. Yacobowski cannot, does not, and will not, look at Pecola, because, after all, the narrator asks rhetorically,

“How can a ...white immigrant [with] his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary... see a little black girl?” (p.48). Instead, his eyes “hesitate, and hover,” because he does not want to “waste the effort of a glance” on a poor, inconsequential, little black girl (p.48). Unfortunately, Pecola knows this look well, the look of “distaste” for “blackness” that she has seen “lurking in the eyes of white people” (p.49): “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see,” which is why, as Bishop points out, the emphasis on “see” is stressed in the question (p.48).

Pecola’s response to Mr. Yacobowski’s treatment is further evidence of her suffering. As she leaves his store, Pecola demonizes the dandelions that , just a few moments earlier, deemed pretty: “Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds” (p.50). Pecola readily accepts Mr. Yacobowski’s attitude that she is not visible, not worth his time. Because her “anger will not hold,” despite the “tears [that] come,” Pecola’s only defense is to eat the Mary Janes, “for whom a candy is *named*” (my emphasis) and from which she receives “nine lovely orgasms” (p.50). Just as Hedy Lamarr and Betty Grable are visible, because they are beautiful, so too, is Mary Jane, whose picture is printed on the candy wrapper. Like Shirley Temple, Mary Jane is the epitome of beauty. She has beautiful white skin, playful hair, and blue eyes. Pecola is mostly fascinated by Mary Jane’s eyes and believes that by attaining them, she will be seen by those like Mr. Yacobowski: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (p.50)

In her childhood, Pecola’s was not given much attention from the adults: “Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information” (p.5). Pecola and her brother do not know love and interest and even when they catch cold, “[their] illness is treated with contempt” (p. 6). As opposed to the white children, cherished by all the adults, the black little girls, from whose perspective the book is written, have to bear disinterest. “Nobody paid us any attention, so we paid very good attention to ourselves” (p. 150). In comparison to Pecola, Claudia’s parents ,neighbours of the Breedloves, provide her with the necessary background for constructing her self-esteem. Pauline ,Cholly and Pecola all accept others' truths as their own ,thereby causing distorted self-images. Morrison shows that the 'truths' are learned primarily during adolescence ,the stage crucial to developing a strong sense of self and pride. They allow "truths" to direct and control their lives even if these are falsehoods,affecting everything they do and say to the point of mania. Cholly ,Pecola's father ,is a victim of injustice .He is forced to have sex with a girl at gunpoint-at an early age. The shame and humiliation he feels is turned into hatred for the girl and then to his daughter .He has no idea how to love his daughter. He wants to do something "tenderly" to her .He is moved into attempting an act of protection ,not caring that it is completely inappropriate response to his own shame .The rape is not an act of cruelty in his eyes ,but the only way how to take care of a woman 20.

Pauline and Cholly encourage the worst in each other .She escapes the poverty and squalor of her own home through her job as a housekeeper at the Fishers. She never eliminate Cholly because her self-image depends on his continued bad behaviour. The distortion of the self is created by the imposition of white norms on black people. The concept of black in the novel is a construct partly of the characters' own making socially based on white definitions of blackness which associate it with violence, poverty , dirt and lack of education.²¹ After Pecola is raped by her father, the lack of preoccupation in other people makes Claudia and Frieda to understand the need to “counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen

Peals" (p.149). So the only people who care about her and the baby ,who is the outcome of the rape, becomes them.

Pecola does question the importance of other's beliefs in beauty while looking at dandelions in the sidewalk, "Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty, but grown-ups say, "Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere" (p. 47). Pecola herself is like a weed that no one grows, and this causes her to question others judgments of her beauty and importance. She briefly recognizes the beauty in something deemed ugly, an outcast like herself. But again she gives in to the pressure to accept other's opinions of appearance after she is judged by the candy man: "Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, "They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds"" (p. 50). The rejection of her beauty causes her to become a judge and believe others' ideals. Just as her mother did, Pecola rejects herself and does not attempt to gain confidence because she herself does not fit into that ideal of beauty.

The three main girl characters, Pecola, Claudia and Frieda, of *The Bluest Eye* are confronted with racial prejudice that makes them believe in their own inferiority. They come to the decision that: "Beauty [is] not simply something to behold; it [is] something one could do" (p.176). Appearance becomes very important for neglected black girls who listen to adults speaking about and indicating what real loveliness and cuteness is. Their self-esteem is directly connected to the concepts of beauty and color, and neither of the categories promotes the realities of black women. Cholly finds adjustment with whom he can instead of whom he should and Claudia finds out that "the change was adjustment without improvement"(p.16).

Black people are visible to whites in this novel in so far as they fit the white frame of beauty. Claudia, the narrator, confesses her hatred towards Shirley Temple and other white girls because they get the attention of all the adults, white and black: "All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. 'Here,' they said, 'this is beautiful, and if you are on this day worthy you may have it. [...] I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable" (p.14). Claudia's refusal to accept the prevailing opinion on what is beautiful provides an important indication of rebellion. It can be read as the beginning of a new era, when black people understand the need for embracing their own self-identity. To see the contradiction clearly means to alter the way of thinking, a path towards a change, even though a solitary one. Pecola belongs to the majority of black girls who dream to resemble white images of popular culture stars that abound everywhere they look: "Frieda and [Pecola] had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was" (p. 13). Having adopted the images of white feminine beauty, Pecola's denial of self contributes to her alienation from the reality and leads to her madness.

The wish to alter her looks and the rejection of her image that Pecola holds is contrasted with a more positive attitude in Claudia who intends to stand up to the racist ideas of beauty and ugliness. It is clear the same societal standards that decided the Breedloves were ugly spared others and called them beautiful. Claudia and her sister Frieda feel hatred toward the new girl, Maureen Peal. Maureen Peal is a rich girl, "as rich as the richest of white girls, swaddled in comfort and care."(Morrison 62) It was because of this richness, that Maureen Peal was revered as beautiful, she was cared for and the Macteer girls "knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us." (Morrison 74) It is this *Thing* that tells people what is beautiful and what is not; it is this *Thing*, that told the Breedloves they were ugly and not good enough,

and at the same time told Maureen Peal she was pretty and good enough. This *Thing* is society; from the movies to candy to human relations; society taught little girls and boys that black is not beautiful and white is.

Claudia and her sister Frieda reflect on the injustices of racism and finally find pride in being who they are. When the three girl protagonists of the book enter into a quarrel with Maureen Peal, a new semi- white girl in the neighborhood, who has everything that the three girls lack: wealth, nice clothes, and beauty which brings her the admiration of whites and blacks alike, Maureen begins shouting racist insults at them: "I am cute! And you are ugly! Black and ugly black e mos" (p.56), although Pecola was shamed by Maureen, she still had a few moments when she could forget she was ugly. Having a beautiful little girl for a friend made Pecola feel beautiful as well.²²

It was the closest that Pecola had come to having blue eyes herself. Maureen compares Pecola to a "mulatto" character in a movie called *Imitation of Life*. Pecola is overjoyed to be identified with a character in a movie and a light skinned character no less. This identification gives Pecola reason to believe that her wish might finally be coming true. However, the girls start to question the importance of being considered cute or ugly. This experience gives them a reason to contemplate their hatred for white dolls, child actresses' icons such as Shirley Temple and girls like Maureen, who is adored and praised for her pretty looks by everybody, children and adults, whites and blacks:

If she was cute – and if anything could be believed, she was – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicier, brighter, but still lesser [...] Guileless and without vanity, we were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that out sensed released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness [...]The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us. (p.58-59)

Even Maureen uses her beauty against them because they refuse to bow to her. However, in an interview with author Gloria Naylor entitled, "A Conversation–Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison," Morrison states that Maureen suffers as much as Pecola does because she receives her self-esteem from society's approval of her beauty, not because she is confident and secure in who she is.²³

Claudia, however, does not share the longing for being white. Her exposure to the white standards of beauty has left her angry and somewhat confused. When she receives a white, blue-eyed baby doll for Christmas, she is revolted, rather than pleased:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adult, other girls[...and] all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured(p.20)

In Claudia's view, motherhood is something she is still too young for. By rejecting to pretend to be a mother of the white doll, Claudia refuses to succumb to the white standardized values:

“The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed BabyDoll. [...] I was bemused by the thing itself, and the way it looked. [...] I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. [...] I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orange worms hair”(p. 13).

When the notice spreads about Pecola’s unwanted motherhood, Claudia and Frieda feel the urge for showing their concern and pity: “I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live – just to counteract images of whiteness impersonated by Shirley Temples and Maureen Peals” (p. 149).

Black is attributed to vulgarity and moral ugliness, while white is celebrated as the “nobler half of humanity” equaled to good manners, noble beauty, and lack of passion. It is repeated several times in the book that black people are treated with contempt. Morrison presents the character Geraldine, a representative of blacks who wish to “move up” in the world and assimilate into white culture and scorn anything or anyone that reminds them they are black. Morrison sees this kind of person as a problem in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the time during which she wrote *The Bluest Eye*, as she explains in her essay “Rediscovering Black History”:

“In the push toward middle-class respectability, we wanted tongue depressors sticking from every black man's coat pocket and briefcases swinging from every black hand In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it”²⁴.

Geraldine is exactly this kind of woman, which Morrison describes in *The Bluest Eye* as “brown girls” who go to any length to eliminate the “funkiness” in their lives, anything that reminds them of the dirt, poverty, and ignorance that they associate with being black. Specifically, Geraldine keeps her son Junior from playing with “niggers” and even makes a distinction between “niggers” and “colored people”: “ She had explained him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud”(p.67). When Junior invites Pecola into his house and torments her with his mother's cat, Geraldine immediately hates her, seeing her as one of the little black girls she had seen “all her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town.... Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt.” In her mind, Pecola is like a fly who has settled in her house and she expels her with the words, “Get out . . . You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house,”(p. 92) leaving Pecola rejected again because of what others perceive as ugliness .The image of the dead cat with its blue eyes closed 'leaving only an empty ,black ,and helpless face ',suggest the cultural vacuum in which blacks ,who aspire to white norms, may eventually find themselves.

Pecola's final encounter on her road to self-destruction caused by her quest for an ideal beauty is Soaphead Church, the town mystic. Morrison depicts his colorist nature with great detail as he is dissented from a mix of a West Indian woman and her noble British lover. His family has struggled to maintain its lighter bloodline. Soaphead is portrayed as an impostor and a child molester. After the rape, Pecola seeks out Soaphead Church to help make sense of her life. She is a afraid from him,

yet she thinks he is her only hope for survival. She confides in him her dream of obtaining blue eyes, and Soaphead understands this request as:

The most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty...this seemed to him the most poignant and the most deserving of fulfillment. A little girl wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. (p. 175)

Soaphead decides to 'play' God and use her naivety at the same time. He cannot make Pecola's dream happen, but he fools her into poisoning the dog. He gives Pecola poisoned meat, to give to a dog he wants dead. If the dog acts in an odd manner, it will be Pecola's sign that her wish has come true. The dog dies and Pecola believes she now has blue eyes, visibly only to her. Soaphead's superiority complex is revealed in his letter to God: "what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show!"(180). Soaphead has been lost in his high education and light-skinned pride, to the extent of feeling justified to play god to a helpless black girl. When Pecola's baby is stillborn, she escapes into hallucinations and illusions, actually believing she has blue eyes. When Pecola came to see Soaphead Church, he saw an innocent little girl asking for the simplest of things to be beautiful, beautiful in society's standards. In his inner monologue he notes how she wants to 'rise up out of the pit of blackness and see the world with blue eyes.'²⁵

Unfortunately, her course of action is to ask for blue eyes, which is certainly nonsense in the context of her situation. Blue eyes wouldn't make her any less pregnant, but Pecola's solution to her personal problems has always been to hide in the symbols of beauty. By praying and going to this fake in hope of blue eyes, Pecola fails in self-reliance and withdraws more deeply into the idea of being beautiful. The rape has clearly destroyed Pecola. And since reality is too painful, Pecola drifts off to the safe Shirley Temple world. More and more, the raw pain in Pecola's existence can no longer be tolerated in her mind. Pecola lives in her head while her body is taken over by the seed that her heartless father, Cholly, planted. The growing baby isolates Pecola even more. Claudia and Frieda show some compassion for Pecola: "we were embarrassed for Pecola, hurt for her, and finally felt sorry for her...And I believe our sorrow was the more intense because nobody seemed to share it" (p. 190). The girls seem empathetic yet they do not talk or console Pecola, causing her more pain. Ultimately Pecola is alone when her baby dies. Then Claudia and Frieda stop making attempts to remain in contact with her. The girls distance themselves from Pecola who is herself the epitome of isolation. The dead baby emphasizes the tragedy of the Pecola who is now dead to her parents. She has been abandoned by society, and this has caused her to take action against her shame, something which she had never done before.²⁶

Pecola will never be satisfied because no matter how hard she tries her eyes will never be blue enough; she will never be perfect enough. Her self-destruction is complete. She can never regain a whole self because she cannot be as complete as others would have her be. There is no winning in this story, only self-defeat. Both Pauline and Pecola are products of society's unattainable standards and are finally destroyed by their inability to move beyond these impossible ideals. Morrison's characters continue to self-destruct, but none as powerfully or completely as Pecola. Her breakdown is the ultimate defeat. Her fascination, idealization and preoccupation of possessing blue eyes blur her sense of reality. "The ironic undertone to Morrison's

point here is that Pecola's ugliness, defined visually by white standards, forces her into a position of invisibility and absence, which in turn becomes her only mode of presence. She hides herself behind the ugliness the mainstream culture won't look at."²⁷

Unfortunately, Pecola becomes more invisible as she isolates herself. She becomes totally fixated on obtaining blue eyes. Most of all, Pecola truly wants to believe and experience an ideal world. By the end of the novel, Pecola has built a safe little inner world. She talks to her imaginary friend and she is finally free of society's ridicule and judgment. The sad fact is that Pecola desperately wants to connect to someone, to be accepted and to be loved. Ultimately, she wants to be validated and told that she does not need blue eyes because she is perfectly Pecola and that is special in itself. In her new world, her blue eyes are granted and a companion consoles her and protects her from life's hardships. Morrison offers Claudia and Frieda as foils to Pecola. They are strong and sturdy; Pecola is not. Claudia's independence and confidence especially throw Pecola's helplessness into stark relief. They would make beauty where only ugliness resided by planting marigolds deep in the earth and receiving the magic of their beauty as a sign of Pecola's salvation. When neither marigolds nor Pecola survive, the girls blame a community that is seduced by a white standard of beauty making Pecola its scapegoat. They are happy with their difference, their blackness:

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. (p.57)

This may suggest that Claudia resist the pressure to conform to a white vision of beauty. ²⁸

Morrison concludes *The Bluest Eye* with Claudia's indictment of the society which "cleaned itself on Pecola as the girl searches the garbage for "the thing we assassinated" (herself), Claudia reflects that "this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live." (p.200) The novel thus comes full circle to the images of infertility with which it began, and this search for a whole self is finished. It seems through the action of the novel that Pecola's doomed quest is but a heightened version of that of her parents, of Church, and of countless others in her world.

Having inherited the feeling of inferiority from her parents and community, Pecola is brought up with "a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (p. 100). Bell Hooks also addresses this destructive conviction in black people's minds that disconnects them from the reality: "Like Pecola, [...], black folks turn away from reality because the pain of awareness is so great"²⁹

The Bluest Eye represents the theme of whiteness as a standard of beauty throughout the entire novel. The title itself is a window into the desire Pecola has, "A little black girl yearns for blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment." (p. 204) Pecola simply desires blue eyes so that she too can be beautiful, while at the end of the novel she sees through her blue eyes, her wish has also caused her mental decline. Pecola ends the novel wandering by the little brown house her mother bought.

"The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. 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."(p.205)

Ignored by her teachers, despised by other adults, detested by her classmates and ultimately raped by her father, Pecola experiences all forms of ugliness, retreating finally into her mad yearning to be the opposite of her self—that is, a white child, like the universally beloved Shirley Temple, with the blondest hair and the bluest eyes. Pecola's demise represents what happens when a society pushes its unobtainable standards onto an already walked over person. Pecola's insanity was not only a result of her father raping her, not only a result of seeing Soaphead Church, not only a result of the world telling her she was invisible and ugly, but rather a combination of all those things . Pecola is a representation of desire; desire to be beautiful and loved. Perhaps this novel shows a dictum which is clearly expressed by Calvin Hernton: "if you are white you are all right; if you are brown you can stick around; but if you are black....get back".³⁰

End Notes

¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, New York: Plume Penguin, 1994. All subsequent quotations refer to this edition. The number of the pages will be enclosed in brackets in the text.

² Valerie Boyd, "Black and Blue: An Unforgettable literary Debut, *The Bluest Eye* was Toni Morrison's attempt to Expel the Despair of a generation", in *Book*, January-February 2003.

³ Black is beautiful One of the most important slogans of the Civil Rights Movement was "Black is Beautiful," an attempt to raise the self-esteem of blacks who felt inferior to white standards of beauty. It is a cultural movement that began in the United States of America in the 1960s by African Americans. It later spread to much of the black world, most prominently in the writings of the Black Consciousness Movement of Steve Biko in South Africa. It aims to dispel the notion in many world cultures that black people's natural features such as skin color, facial features and hair are inherently ugly. For more information visit

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_is_beautiful-

⁴ Ruth Rosenberg, "Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*." *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 21, No. 4. (Winter, 1987), pp. 435-445.

⁵ Quoted in Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (Ed.), *THE TONI MORRISON ENCYCLOPEDIA*, London: Greenwood Press, 2003, p.107.

⁶ Timothy Powell, "Toni Morrison: The Struggle to Depict the Black Figure on the White Page", *Black American Literature Forum* 24 (1990): 747-60.

⁷ Quoted in *THE TONI MORRISON ENCYCLOPEDIA* , p.2003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Malin Lavon Walther, "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty", *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol. 24, No. 4, Women Writers Issue. (Winter, 1990), pp. 775-789.

¹⁰ Emily Mullins, "Shirley Temple and Society's Ideal of Beauty", Michigan State University, Eng 153, 2005.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jacqueline de Weever, "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*," in *CLA Journal*, Vol. , No. 4, June, 1979, pp 402–14.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1999,p.170.

¹⁶ Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak, "Remembering the body: Body politics in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*",-*Literature Interpretation Theory*, 1545-5866, Volume 12, Issue 2, 2001, Pages 189 – 203.

¹⁷ Malin Lavon Walther, "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty",p.777.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Missy Dehn Kubitsches, *Toni Morrison: a Critical Companion*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998, pp.191-192.

²⁰ Jacqueline de Weever, "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*" p.23

²¹ Harold Bloom(Ed.), *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*, p.171.

²² Missy Dehn Kubitsches, *Toni Morrison: a Critical Companion*., p.200.

²³ Gloria Naylor, "A Conversation: Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison," in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danille Guthrie-Taylor,–Jackson: Mississippi UP, 1994, pp. 188–217.

²⁴ Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," in *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 1974, pp 14–24.

²⁵ Jacqueline de Weever, "The Inverted World of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*".p.,413.

²⁶ Malin Lavon Walther, "Out of Sight: Toni Morrison's Revision of Beauty",p.777.

²⁷ Harold Bloom (Ed.), *Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye*, p.170.

²⁸ Ibid.,pp. 190-91.

²⁹-Bell Hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992, p.6.

³⁰ Quoted in Chiwenye Okonjo Ogunyerm, "Order and Disorder in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Critique, Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. 19, no 1, 1977, pp. 112–120.

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التطلع للجمال المثالي في رواية "العين الشديدة الزرقة" للكاتبة الافريقية- الامريكية توني موريسون

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الخلاصة:

في "العين الشديدة الزرقة" (١٩٧٠)، تبين الكاتبة الافريقية-الامريكية توني موريسون كيف يتشكل وينتشر مفهوم المعايير الغربية للجمال المثالي بين افراد المجتمع الاسود. ولاتصور الرواية فقط كيف ان حياة ذو البشرة السمراء او الزنوج تدمرت بسبب لون بشرتهم تبين ايضاً الخسارة الإنسانية التي دُتْ عندما لا توضع معايير حقيقية وواقعية للجمال. وتركز موريسون في هذه الرواية على الضرر الذي تعاني منه الشخصيات النسائية السوداء في بنائهن الأنثوي في مجتمع عنصري لا يعترف سوى بالصفات الجسدية لذوي البشرة البيضاء كمعيار اساسي للجمال..