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THE BLUEST EYE

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye is a novel written by the Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison in the year 1970. All Morrison's texts have the subject matter similar to *The Bluest Eye.* Her novels discuss the experiences of the oppressed black minorities in isolated communities and the dominant white culture discouraging the healthy African-American self-image. Generally, the major characters in Toni Morrison's novels are black. Her writing is about the black experience and black minority, whose ethnic existence is threatened by the white society. Eventually, her main concern is to bring back black issues into general awareness. "The issues of ethnic inequality, black community and individual's struggle in white society, as well as the empowerment of blacks through the realization of their rich inheritance continue to represent themselves in the author's novels". (Sugiharti, pp. 2-3).

Beauty is a characteristic of person, animal, place, object, or idea that provides a perceptual experience of pleasure or satisfaction. If this thing of pleasure or satisfaction is idolized or constructed or politicized, the implications may be horrible. It is seen in the novel *The Bluest Eye* that how the beauty attributed to one on the basis of color leaves its adverse effect on the other. In the novel, the beauty constructed by one turns into bitter pills for others. The interference of the so-called beauty standards into the human community create disharmony and produce an unhealthy attitude towards each other and self (Roddannavar, 2013, p. 2). The novel reveals the implications of white beauty standards on black community through the protagonist of the novel Pecola, who goes under her own black societal ill-treatment in the name of color and eventually becomes insane. "In the novel, she suffers the confusion, the start of puberty, the bitter racial harassment, and the tragedy of rape. Through Pecola, Morrison exposes the power and the cruelty of the white and the definition of beauty of middle-class American, for which, Pecola will be driven mad by her consuming obsession for white skin and blond hair and not just blue eyes, but the bluest ones. Pecola believes that people would value her more if she were not black. If she were white, blond, and blue-eyed, she would be loved. It is this kind of self-hatred and admirations of whiteness as the standard of beauty make her to be a victim of popular white culture and at the same time ruins her." (A miserable Black Girl-Analysis of the Theme in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye)

The Bluest Eye opens with a short "Dick and Jane" primary reader story that is repeated three times. The first time, the story is written clearly. In second telling, however, the text looses its capitalization and punctuation. By the third time, the story looses its spacing. The novel then shifts to a short, italicized preface in the voice of Claudia MacTeer as an adult. She looks back on the fall of 1941 (The Narrative Strategies Used by the Writer in 'The Bluest Eye', p. 1). We find that this book will be the story of Claudia and Frieda and their involvement with a young black girl named Pecola, pregnant with her father's child.

Claudia MacTeer recounts the events of the year that led up to her best friend's, Pecola Breedlove's, rape and the death of her baby. The year is 1941, and Claudia remembers that no marigolds bloomed that year. She thought it was because of Pecola's rape by her own father Cholly Breedlove that no marigolds bloomed.

In Part II: Autumn, Claudia's memories go back to the fall of 1940 (one year before the marigolds did not bloom). Claudia and her older sister, Frieda, live in a home that takes in borders. Mr. Henry moves in and flatters the girls by telling them they look like Ginger Rogers and Greta Garbo. Soon after that, a girl named Pecola moves in with them, as ordered by the country. She will live there until the country can find a better home for her as Cholly, father of Pecola, burnt down her old home. Pecola and the two girls become friends and go through many experiences together, including Pecola's first biological period.

In Pecola's family, Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Pecola's parents, have a bad marriage. Pecola's mother always works hard, but Cholly always comes home drunk and beats Pauline. They yell and fight, and Pecola and Sammy, Pecola's brother, each look for an escape in their own ways. Sammy will often run away from his family. Pecola, meanwhile, prays that her eyes should turn into a beautiful blue-colored. She thinks that if her eyes were blue, different would be the things, and more than that, she would be pretty. Pecola becomes obsessed with her quest for blue eyes.

In Part III: Winter, Claudia tells of a new girl named Maureen Peal, who comes to their school. At school, children tease Pecola by calling her "Black e mo" because she is dark-skinned (Morrison, 1999). They mean that Pecola is even blacker than they are. It is absolutely a black's attack on another black who shares brotherhood in his own community. Another same sort of incident takes place when Maureen meets Pecola. Maureen, the *half white* "high yellow dream child" according to Claudia, befriends with Pecola and becomes kind to her in the beginning, but later turns into hostile due to some reasons. She yells from across the street:

> "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (Morrison, 1999)

The next section of the novel describes Geraldine, her son Junior, and their blue-eyed black cat. *The Bluest Eye* also talks of the "Mobile girls", women who attempt to control and modify their blackness (Morrison, 1999). These are women who to hide their blackness, straighten their hair, control their body odors, and learn to behave in a way to "do the white man's work with refinement…." (Morrison, 1999). Geraldine is one such woman who moves to Lorain with her husband and son. She doesn't nurture her son, rather cares for him. One day, her son Junior manages to get Pecola into his house and then throws a cat at her. The cat gets hurt because of his mischievous acts. He puts the blame on Pecola when his mother Geraldine enters the house. Geraldine takes a glance at Pecola:

> "She had seen this little girl all her life… Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and cakes with dirt. They had started up at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything." (Morrison, 1999)

Pecola reminds Geraldine her own black community in which she never wants to be existed. To her, blacks are "niggers" (Morrison, 1999). Having well comfort middle class life, Geraldine does not want to slip down from the social hierarchy. She teaches her son how to deal with blacks and wants him not to risk their (her family's) positions by having an association with "*niggers.*"

Geraldine takes an opportunity to release her anger; she abuses Pecola:

> "Geraldine, a representative of blacks, wish to 'move up' in the world and assimilate into white culture and acorn anything or anyone that reminds them they are black. Morrison sees this kind of person as problematic in the wake of the Civil Right Movement." (The Quest for an Ideal Beauty in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye)

In Part IV: Spring, Claudia tells of how Mr. Henry touched Frieda's breast and how he was beaten up by their father. The two girls go to visit Pecola in her new house, a downstairs apartment. Above, there are three prostitutes- Marie, China, and Poland-whom Pecola often visits and talks with.

Then, Pauline Breedlove's younger years are described. It explains how she would often go to the movies. Because of this, eventually, she became fascinated with Hollywood ideals of beauty. She saw famous movie stars like Jean Harlow as true representations of beauty, and anything straying from that was not deemed beautiful. In the novel, we see Paulin's fondness for the white world. Paulin always wanted to live in her own ideal world-the world of white. She worked at the white people's house, cleaned their house, and loved their children, but she never loved her own children because they were black in color who would remind her, her own color- the ugly color that would cut in her ideal white world. In one of the incidents, Paulin slaps and abuses Pecola for dropping the pie on the floor at Fisher's home because she disturbs her clean, white world. She goes a step forward to console the weeping Fisher girl:

"Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it." (Morrison, 1999, p. 107)

On the contrary, the treatment for Pecola was different; she,

"Yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again and in a voice thin with anger abused Pecola directly…." (p. 107)

Pecola was deprived of all the love and affection that she had to deserve. She herself was a witness for shifting of love and affection to a white girl, who, in fact, was none to Pecola's mother. Pauline always dreamt of having a light- skinned child when she was pregnant. Before Pecola's birth, she would talk to her in the womb and treat her as a mother should do. The close bond of mother and daughter comes to an end when Paulin gives birth to Pecola-who is ugly in color. She abandons 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. 124)

Paulin doesn't give her daughter unconditional love since she judges her daughter from physical beauty. Color stands as an obstacle between a mother and daughter's relationship.

Then, the narration focuses on Cholly Breedlove's background. He is abandoned by his mother and father and is raised by his great Aunt Jimmy, who later dies. Cholly has hatred against white people. This is so because, when Cholly was having sexual pleasure with a girl named Darlene, he was cut in by the two white men who forced him, a fourteen old boy, to do the act of sex on Darlem for their entertainment. Since he was powerless then to encounter those men, he turned to the powerless Darlene, who was a witness for his humiliation. He thought Darlen might become pregnant, so he ran away to Macon, Georgia, to try and find his real father. He finds him, but discovers that his father is a drunkard and a gambler who wants nothing to do with Cholly. Cholly runs to Kentucky, where he meets and marries Puline. They eventually have two children, Sammy and Pecola.

Once, Cholly comes home drunk afternoon and sees Pecola washing dishes in the kitchen. She reminds him, for a moment, of Pauline, Cholly's wife, and in a bit of confusion and love, he rapes his daughter. He leaves her on the kitchen floor feeling ashamed and alone.

The character of Elihue Micah Whitcomb (Soaphead Church) is introduced. "Soaphead, like Geraldine, is struggling with blackness and finds Pecola an easy target for his self-loathing" (Fultz, 2003). Pecola visits him one day and asks him to make her wish come true of having blue eyes. Thinking that he is the only one to help her, Soaphead, born *half white* (a black with light white skin), feels superiority complex and would like to play God to give justice to a helpless black girl. He tricks her into poisoning an old, sick dog that he hates. He tells Pecola that if the dog behaves strangely, then, that is a sign from God that her eyes color would turn into blue the next day. After Pecola feeds the dog the strange meat (poisoned), she sees that the dog chokes, falls down and dies. Horrified, she runs out of the house.

In Part V: Summer, Claudia tells of how she and Frieda learned from rumors and gossip that Pecola was pregnant by her father. They overhear adults talking about the child and how it will probably not survive. Claudia and Frieda seem to be the only humans who want the baby to live. They make a promise to God to be good for a whole month and plant marigold seeds that will serve as a sign for them. When the seeds sprout, they will know that everything will be all right. However, the readers already know that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" and that nothing turns out right for Pecola (Vaidyanathan, p. 144).

The next chapter is a deranged dialogue carried out between Pecola and herself. In which, she discusses her new blue eyes, questioning if they are the "bluest eyes" in the world. We also discover that Cholly has raped his daughter more than once. Her madness, then, appears to be a defense against the pain of living her life.

The last voice in the novel is Claudia's, now an adult looking back, trying to assign blame for the tragedy of Pecola. She tells us that Pecola's baby died soon after birth and Cholly is dead as well, that Mrs. Breedlove still works for white folks, and that Pecola spends her days talking to herself and picking at the garbage in a dump. The novel closes with an indictment of the community and the culture:

"And now when I see her searching the garbage-for what? The thing we assassinated? I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruits it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much too late" (p. 204).

The novel *The Bluest Eye* is important for many reasons: "This novel came about at a critical moment in the history of American Civil rights." (A miserable Black Girl-Analysis of the Theme in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye, p. 1). It was written "…. during the years of some of the most dynamic and turbulent transformations of Afro-American life" (p. 1). Published in the midst of the Black Arts movement that flourished during the late 1960s and early 1970s, *The Bluest Eye* has attracted considerable attention from literary critics. With its sensitive portrait of African-American female identity and its astute critique of the internalized racism bred by American cultural definitions of beauty, *The Bluest Eye* has been widely seen as a literary watershed, inspiring a proliferation of literature written by African-American women about their identity and experience as women of color. Scholars also have been attracted to *The Bluest Eye* by its deconstruction of "whiteness" along racial, gender, and economic lines, while feminists have equated the violence of the narrative with self-hatred wrought by a wide range of illusions about white American society and African-American women's place in it. In addition, some have examined the naturalism. Others have offered Marxist interpretations of the novel's formal aspects in terms of the ideological content of its representation of African-American life. Acknowledging Morrison's achievement in the novel, critics have generally acclaimed *The Bluest Eye* for deconstructing a number of literary taboos with its honest portrayals of American girlhood, its frank descriptions of intraracial racism or "colorism" in the African-American community, and its thoughtful treatment of the emotional precocity of prepubescent girls (The Narrative Strategies Used by the Writer in 'The Bluest Eye', p. 4).

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