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Race, identity and beauty standards in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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MAY GOD BE IN OUR AID

Abd Elmoize ***Babi***

Abstract:

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, portrays the narrative of a black little girl who is torn apart by thoughts of self-loathing and rejection from everyone around her. The purpose of this paper is to examine how the novel presents the concepts of identity, race, and gender, as well as how they relate to issues of white beauty standards, self-loathing, and racial pride with the use of critical race theory (CRT). I believe *The Bluest Eye* is a protest against the acceptance of beauty as a positive and universal ideal, and that the novelist is calling for the development of wholesome, healthy identities through a connection to a community's culture and heritage. To do so, I begin by returning to the historical and sociopolitical context in which the novel was written. Finally, I give my study of the work, including its formal structures and characters. In conclusion, I assert that Toni Morrison argues that the very concept of beauty is destructive and restrictive, rather than supporting the Black Arts Movement's statement "Black is Beautiful. "Rather than encouraging the perception that blackness is attractive, the author advocates that African Americans should be valued for their culture, customs, and ties to the community.

Keywords: Beauty, Critical Race Theory, The Bluest Eye. Gender, Race, Identity

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General Introduction

Motivation:

One of the most troubling ideologies that I always find problems understanding is beauty, Morrison's approach to this idea is very pleasing to my ears.
After reading *The Bluest Eye* I found myself less troubled with the idea therefore I began this study to better understand and support the idea of no color is more or less beautiful than the other. If this idea was to be developed, we would reach a point where we'll achieve perfect harmony between our need for similarity and common ground and our pride towards what makes us unique without losing any of the two.

1. Objectives of the Study:

This research aims to:

- Understanding Morrison's opposition towards the "the black is beautiful" slogan.
- Analyzing and uncovering the race, gender in Morrison's *The Bluest eye*.

2. Statement of the Problem:

The novel received a lot of criticism due to the fact that some readers interpretation led them to think that Toni Morrison was against what they saw as identity and racial pride –the slogan "black is beautiful." The main disagreement about Toni Morrison's idea about beauty is due to the fact that most critics have seen Toni's work as only discouraging to the idea of countering white beauty with black beauty and that the margin between identity (African American) and color (black) is somehow blurred in her novel.

3. Research Questions:

This study intends to present answers to the following questions:

- To what extent is the critical race theory appropriate in the analysis of *The Bluest Eye*?
- What are the standers of beauty in the eyes of the author Toni Morrison?

4. Structure of the Dissertation:

This thesis consists of two parts; the first part is the political background that provides an overview of the African American historical background. The second part is a critical reading of "*The Bluest Eye*" with the employment of CRT (Critical Race Theory).

1.6 Introduction

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison's first novel, was written in the 1960s and released in 1970. The book tells the shocking story of Pecola Breedlove, a black little girl who descends into madness after being emotionally and physically abused on several occasions by the entire community around her, including–and especially–her family, through multiple layers of voices and different narrative techniques.

Pecola, who is eleven years old, lives in Lorain, Ohio, with her family. She spends a few days with the MacTeer family when her father, Cholly, burns down their house. One of the narrators who relates Pecola's story is Claudia, the youngest MacTeer. The Breedlove girl is regularly tormented and mistreated by teachers, classmates, neighbors, and family during the years covered by the story, 1940 and 1941. Because she thinks of herself as ugly, she blames their mistreatment on her physical appearance, believing that if she were beautiful, no one would behave cruelly in front of her. The time Pecola is raped by her father, becomes pregnant, and loses her sanity is one of the most traumatic incidents in her life. Claudia is trying to make sense of all that occurred to the youngest Breedlove and their tribe by narrating her story.

The work highlights questions of racial self-loathing, the threat of white beauty standards, and the loss of one's self through the story of Pecola and the people who surround her. My goal with this project is to examine using the CRT approach how the novel depicts identity in terms of race and gender, how the novel may be taken as a claim for racial pride, and what is Morrison's recommendation for a healthy, healed identity.

It appears that learning about African American culture and existence is necessary in order to gain a deeper comprehension of the story told by the literature. Because racism is a major theme in the book, it's important to address issues like black identity, racial pride, and self-loathing brought on by the prevailing white society.

As a result, it appears that addressing race issues is not only good, but also required, in order to avoid the trap of being touched but not moved, as Morrison has cautioned us about. Reading

and viewing Morrison's interviews, the use of the CRT approach is needed to further understand and analyze the racial critics presented about the novel.

The author creates important connections between events and concepts such as the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, Black Nationalism, and the Black Arts Movement in subtle ways. As a result, the first chapter of this book focuses on a brief examination of the historical and political context of the 1960s, as this information will be crucial in the novel's interpretation in chapter two.

Race and gender concerns are at the heart of *The Bluest Eye*. Toni Morrison's fiction frequently explores these themes. The author has stated in several interviews that she always identifies herself as a black woman writer who works primarily for a black readership and is interested with speaking of African Americans and their culture in an African American language. Morrison stated in an interview with *The Paris Review* that her work is very important to her, and that she considers it more vital that her work falls into the black culture heritage than the literary canon tradition. (Morrison "Art").

The Bluest Eye is no exception to Morrison's creative tendencies in that it treats Pecola's race as totally significant information. However, as the author points out in the book's foreword, the fact that she is a young child is crucial to the story: "I focused, therefore, on how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison IX–X).

As a result, identity, ethnicity, and gender are all discussed in the second chapter of this book, as they are crucial to the development of Pecola's character and the novel as a whole. The New Negro Movement, the Black Arts Movement, and black feminism are all discussed in relation to black identity. Morrison develops conversations with ideas that originated in these circumstances, so she examines what those artistic and political movements were saying at the time. These will also be used as analysis tools for the novel.

In the work's second chapter, I examine the novel's structure and some of its characters in light of the previously discussed themes of identity, race, and gender. I contend, based on rigorous investigation, that Morrison views beauty as a very damaging idea in the lives of

African Americans, and I show passages from the book and theoretical writings to support that claim.

Finally, in the conclusion, I suggest that Morrison appears to feel that adopting the white concept of beauty may be harmful to African Americans, and that assimilating the white concept of beauty may not be the greatest option for their recovery. As a result, I investigate potential solutions the writer might propose for the building of healthy identities.

Chapter I
Historical and Political Background

1. Historical and Political Background

According to Morrison's afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, which was added to the novel in 1993, the work was written between 1965 and 1969. “a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people” (*Morrison* 208). Because the author emphasizes the significance of recalling the politically charged climate of the 1960s in order to comprehend some of the novel's core themes, a few incidents from that decade, as well as some that preceded them, will be covered now. What became known as the Civil Rights Movement refers to a series of events and mobilizations that took place in the United States throughout most of the twentieth century, and are rooted not only in the American Civil War of 1861–1865, but also in the entire slavery process that blacks underwent while in North American soil and its aftermath.

Following the Civil War, African Americans fought fiercely for their right to vote and resisted segregation in fields such as public transportation and education throughout the Reconstruction period. Nonetheless, many white citizens, particularly in the South, committed racist violence against black people, and war fatigue kept many national political leaders from fighting for African Americans' rights, fearing that they would lose votes and support, leading to even more protests. The Supreme Court consolidated legalized segregation in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), declaring that blacks would have “separate-but-equal” facilities (Palmer 471). Some groups were formed in the early twentieth century to demand civil rights for black people. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was one of the most influential, demanding racial equality and hoping to educate elite public opinion into a more respectful and welcoming attitude toward African Americans as fellow citizens.W.E.B. Du Bois, a writer and scholar, was one of the organization's most significant members and editor of The Crisis, the organization's journal (472).While the NAACP did win a few legal triumphs, institutional segregation remained strong throughout the first three or four decades of the twentieth century, preventing African Americans from having the same rights, opportunities, and rewards as whites.

Nonetheless, a few key events made it difficult to dismiss and ignore the black presence in political and economic activities. The enormous migrations of blacks from the South to the North, the Great Depression of 1929, the growing number of African Americans in industrial unions and on the federal payroll, and World War II were just a few of these events. During the early 1940s, as Palmer points out,

> *Black activists and liberal intellectuals called for a "Double Victory" against fascism abroad and racism at home, sharply illuminating the contradiction between fighting a war against the vicious racial policies of Nazi Germany while sustaining a legalized racist order at home. (Palmer 473)*

The NAACP scored a major success in 1944, when the Supreme Court removed the official prohibition of blacks from party primary elections in the South in Smith v. Allwright. In 1954, it achieved yet another victory. Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's chief legal counsel, achieved satisfactory results after arguing in numerous cases before the Supreme Court that segregation denied blacks "equal protection of the laws," as stated in the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution8, which all individuals born or naturalized in the United States must have.

Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, that "The doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place in the field of public education." However, the win was not as complete and positive as it first appeared. The opposition to the civil rights program grew stronger, and hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan resurfaced.

In response to white supremacist protests, the Supreme Court declared in 1955 that no timeline for school desegregation was necessary. As a result, many educational institutions took their time in modifying their rules. This standstill, combined with the reality that some black students who had begun attending previously all-white schools required federal troops' protection from white supremacists, severely slowed desegregation efforts (473–474).

However, Brown inspired a lot of black activists. Rosa Parks, the secretary of the NAACP, was arrested in December 1955 after refusing to give up her seat on a segregated bus to a white man. The Montgomery Improvement Association was created after it, and it organized a bus boycott. Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, who had only been in Montgomery for a year, was chosen as the boycott's leader (NAACP), becoming one of the Civil Rights Movement's most visible public icons. In reality, it was this encounter with Rosa Parks, as well as the protest organized by Martin Luther King, that sparked the Civil Rights Movement. The boycott lasted a year and a half. It was a difficult time, as King was arrested, his home was bombed, and black folks were forced to walk miles every day rather than take segregated buses. It did, however, result in an important victory: in Browder v. Gale, the Supreme Court decided that racial

segregation on buses was unconstitutional (NAACP. Web). The Civil Rights Movement embraced a concept of nonviolent opposition against discrimination and injustice under King's leadership. The reverend and his supporters want an end to segregation, interracial brotherhood, and equality for all people10.Integrationist values were upheld by them. King justified confronting authorities with a willingness to suffer rather than harming them, thus exposing the injustice and cruelty of segregation through the new media and pushing those in authority to change it (Palmer 474–475). Most black activists followed this mindset for the next decade, participating in nonviolent protests such as marches, sit-ins at white-only lunch counters, sit-ins at cinemas and swimming pools, and boycotts of offending businesses. Because of the enormous number of protests and widespread support, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the National Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law (475). Both of these acts made discrimination against black people illegal, declaring all segregation unconstitutional and making discriminatory voting practices illegal.

New black social justice movements arose around this time. The Black Power Movement was one of them, with activists arguing that black political empowerment and self-defense were required to improve African American lives and meet their needs (Rucker 662–663).The name of the movement was most likely originated during the James Meredith March Against Fear in June 1966. (Shay. Web). Meredith, who had successfully integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962, decided to march alone from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, to encourage the black population to register to vote, thus defying the terror created by white supremacists for so long (Bailey; Meredith. Web).Meredith was escorted by a few friends and supporters and followed by the police, despite the fact that the march had been organized as a one-man event. Meredith was shot by a white salesman on the second day of the march. He was able to survive his injuries, although he was unable to continue immediately. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) were among the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement who traveled in his place. Soon after, the latter began questioning the Movement's nonviolent approach and reliance in white kindness, and began utilizing "Black Power" as an alternative slogan to the previously unofficially accepted "We Shall Overcome" by the Civil Rights Movement (Rucker 663).

Ture and Charles V. Hamilton's 1967 book Black Power: The Politics of Liberation, according to Rucker, defined Black Power as

> *mobilizing African Americans to use their newfound political voice–as a result of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act–to create semiautonomous communities in which black police officers patrolled black people, black businesses provided jobs, black elected officials and black-controlled political parties articulated the aspirations of African Americans, and African Americans used armed self-defense to protect their lives. (Rucker 663)*

As a result, Black Power can be considered a component of the Black Nationalism political and social movement. In fact, along with "Black is Beautiful," "Black Power" became one of the slogans of Black Nationalism. The majority of its supporters advocated for the construction of separate black communities, the development of economic self-sufficiency for such communities, and the employment of self-defense rather than assimilation by whites. It also sparked cries of racial pride (663).

King's strategies included nonviolence and a willingness to suffer in order for those in power to see their suffering, feel embarrassed for creating it, and resolve to put an end to it, and he hoped for equality and universal brotherhood. Meanwhile, Black Power and Black Nationalism advocated for separation from white People, the construction of entirely black communities, and the use of self-defense in the event of a conflict.

Toni Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* in the midst of these ideological clashes, and the second chapter examines what Morrison and other black women authors and critics had to say about the conceptions of identity brought by the Black Arts Movement, which was contemporaneous with Black Power.

1.2. Personal Background

1.2.1. Toni Morrison's Earlier Life

Toni Morrison, also known as Chloe Anthony Wofford, is a Pulitzer Prize and Noble Prize winner. She was born in Lorain, Ohio on February 18th, 1931. Morrison was raised in the American Midwest, in a family that had a strong respect and understanding for African-American culture. Both her father and mother's families were victims of racism, but they were able to escape sharecropping and indebtedness by settling in a steel-mill town.
Morrison felt that reading was one of her favorite things to do once she had acquired that skill. She began reading the works of great authors such as Jane Austen (1775–1817), Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and the nineteenth-century French writer Gustave Flaubert (1821–1880) when she

was in high school. The specific way these writers portrayed the topics they were familiar with impressed Morrison.
Their abilities inspired her to write about the topics she was most familiar with, particularly African American culture. Morrison enrolled at Howard University in Washington, D.C., to study English in 1949. Because people at Howard couldn't pronounce Chloe, she changed her name to Toni. She was a member of the Howard University Players, a theater group that performed plays on African-Americans' lives.
Morrison graduated from Howard University with a bachelor's degree in English in 1953. She went on to teach for two years at Texas Southern University in Houston after receiving her master's degree in English from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, in 1955. She then went back to teach at Howard University. She graduated from Howard in 1958 and went on to Cornel University to further her study. Virginia Wolf and William Faulkner were the subjects of her thesis. In 1955, she obtained her master's degree

1.2.2. Toni Morrison's Impact on Literature

1.2.2.1. Themes

Toni Morrison, an American writer, grew up during America's struggling period of the Great Depression and its aftermath, which wrecked a whole society, particularly Black society. She saw the struggle for survival in her society and family. As a result, in most of her novels, the issue of racial conflict between African-Americans and white society dominates, as seen through the eyes of African-American characters.
Many of her novels, such as Beloved, Sula, and The Bluest Eye, are set during periods of white injustice towards the Black people, such as during the slave era or during the Great Depression. Her characters' struggle with identity is evident in their inability to identify themselves, and they frequently fail to establish their identity.
However, Morrison's other themes, such as ancestors and beauty standards, are frequently used in her novels to provide cultural background of Black history, and as one of the characteristics of Black history writings, she gives a voice to the Black minority in social and economic states as inferiors, under the themes of loss of innocence, through young characters, as well as the theme of inside battle between evil and good.
This author enriches the African-American experience, particularly the lives of black women. Toni Morrison also tries to illustrate Black women's sacrifices and suffering in both White society and the Black community. She was the first African-American woman to have remarkable works that qualified her for numerous awards in the field of literature.

1.2.2.2. Style

Toni Morrison's writing style is unique and clearly recognized literary, thanks to her unique use of language, elegant and vivid vocabulary. Morrison's writings focus on African-American communities through details that engage the reader and allow them to visualize the events. Her

books are simple to read, and she uses a variety of styles in them, such as changing the narration voice throughout the story to give the reader a distinct perspective.
The employment of descriptive analogies, significant historical references, and diversified sentence structure are some of her most popular techniques. Morrison is well-known for her use of strange yet effective comparisons to further describe the information she offers. In particular, she employs similes in her writing to assist the reader link the text to other pictures and experiences.
Morrison's writings as a feminist focused on the Black female character, where themes of racism, beauty striving for identity, and family are constantly present to reflect a portion of her life. The minority issue captures a piece of Morrison's fictional and creative brain, which aids her in describing events in a hazy manner, prompting the reader to wonder "why?"

1.2.2.3. Major Works

Morrison's long list of excellent works, which portray a full culture, has left a significant legacy to the literature field. Morrison's first book, The Bluest Eye (1970), is a novel about a mistreated Black adolescent girl preoccupied with white beauty standards and yearning for blue eyes. Sula (1973), the second book, looks at the dynamics of friendship and the temptation to conform.

Toni Morrison's other major novel, Song of Solomon, was released in 1977 and gave her national fame. Beloved (1987), a true story based novel that earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, tells the story of a female black slave who kills her newborn to escape slavery.
Aside from Jazz (1992), Mercy (2008), and God Help the Child (2015), she has a number of other well-known novels, short stories, and children's stories that reflect a side of her fictional writings and detailed style.

Conclusion

Overall, this chapter gives historical context for concerns of racism and discrimination against African-Americans in the United States throughout the 1930s, as well as some of the hardships they faced in establishing and confirming their identity.
It also provides a brief personal history of novelist Toni Morrison and her impact on Black literature. An outstanding writer with a fantastic sense of literature and a significant honor to show her Black culture to the world via her literary works, Toni Morrison is an incredible writer.

Chapter II
Identity, Race And Gender In The Bluest Eye

Introduction

The Bluest Eye is a novel that raises issues of identity, gender, and race, and establishes a conversation with 1960s debates on these topics. Morrison examines these issues through the plot, formal elements, and characters of the novel. As a result, in this chapter, all of those components are investigated in order to determine what the novelist is implying about identity, gender, and ethnicity.

The formal devices of the novel are discussed in the first portion of this chapter. Its structure and narrative voice are both interesting, and they provide insight into Morrison's problems with the tagline "Black is Beautiful." The formal devices appear to imply that African American traditions are essential for developing wholesome and healthy identities.

The characters who are oppressed by beauty standards and who use them to oppress others are also crucial to Morrison's possible mission of questioning beauty standards and the concept of beauty itself. As a result, they are separated into groups and explored in subsequent sections. Some characters, such as Pauline, Maureen Peal, and Geraldine, adopt and try to emulate white lifestyle notions.

The manner they distinguish themselves from other African Americans, as well as the suffering they cause themselves and other blacks by judging them unworthy, are some of the topics covered in depth in section 2.2. Cholly Breedlove is the character who is scrutinized in 2.3. Because he had been abused as a child, the young man became an abuser himself. Cholly's rage about being humiliated by white males when he was thirteen was diverted at those who were much more vulnerable than he was: women and, eventually, his daughter. In section 2.4, Pecola Breedlove, the girl whose terrible life is told in the novel, is examined.

At least five characters, including herself, refer to the girl as "ugly." People don't appear to be able to exhibit or even feel affection for her since she doesn't suit white beauty standards. As a result, in section 2.4, the relationship between physical attractiveness and a sense of worthiness is examined.

Claudia MacTeer is discussed in the chapter's final section, 2.5. Her likely role as the narrator of the entire work is explored because she displays some opposition to the worship of white beauty standards. Finally, her aims of comparing African American customs and ideals with absorption of white life patterns are discussed.

2.1 The structure of the novel

Morrison's issues regarding race, gender, and identity are not solely conveyed through story and characters. Formal techniques like structure and narrative voice are equally important to comprehending the concepts explored in *The Bluest Eye*, thus they'll be looked at here.
For example, at the novel's very beginning, we come across the following text:

> *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 live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play. (Morrison .1)*

This is based on a primer written by William Elson and William Gray in the 1930s and widely used in American public schools to teach youngsters to read. The writings, which depicted white middle-class families, aimed to show youngsters the daily lives of " true and brave American boys and girls" and educate them how to " become a helpful American citizen " (Werrlein 2007).

Dick and Jane were shown as good and noble children who could be looked up to and emulated. Dick is a brown-haired male, and Jane is a blond girl, as illustrated in the image on the following page. Their father, mother, and younger sister are all fair-skinned. They symbolize a self-constructed American image, one that embraced the dominant society's ideals and matched the image they wanted to project to its citizens and, through movies and novels, the rest of the world. Anything that wasn't a white image was dismissed. The country's literature was engaged

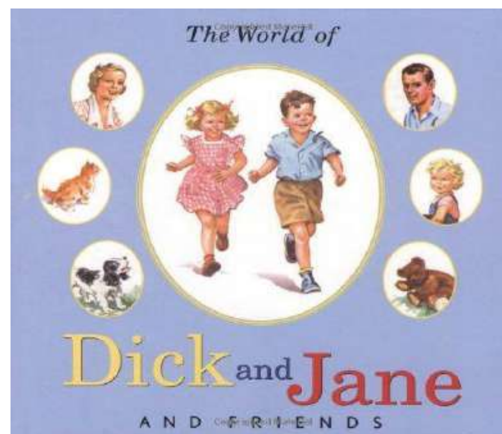
in forging a national cultural identity, as Morrison herself highlighted in Playing in the Dark, and "American means white" was a consistent pattern (Morrison 39; 47).

The same phrase appears immediately after the first prime part, but this time without any punctuation or capitalization. It appears to be a little disorganized, but it is still readable. The third paragraph, on the other hand, has the same text without any punctuation, capitalization, or space between the letters. It appears chaotic and nearly incoherent with everything squished together.

According to critics like Malmgren, the first paragraph is designed to reflect Dick and Jane's "ideal" American family, which is white. The second is linked to the MacTeers, while the third is linked to the Breedloves (Malmgren 152).

Dick and Jane are not like the MacTeers since they are black and poor. Despite the fact that they do not fit Elson and Gray's American self-portrait, their primer is still readable because they clearly love and defend one another.

The Breedloves, on the other hand, are not like Dick and Jane or the MacTeers. Morrison makes it clear in the afterword section that they are not a representative African American family, which she demonstrates by putting the MacTeers in the story. Theirs is a one-of-a-kind circumstance caused by the interplay of racism (internal and external), poverty, and a lack of affection. Their paragraph is jumbled and nonsensical because their life is in turmoil, and they believe that they, too, have no significance or value as humans.



Picture 1 – Dick and Jane

Source: Gray, William S., at Amazon Webstore

The dissemination of those Dick and Jane primers in schools, which purported to demonstrate good attributes in American youngsters, was harmful in several ways. First and foremost, should black children think themselves unwanted, like the Breedloves did, since they were not represented in the texts? Was it therefore expected of African Americans to try to copy and act like Dick and Jane, if they were the role models? As the novel reveals, such assimilation may be devastating to a child's brain, and it's possible that the chaotic Breedlove version of the prime foreshadows Pecola's descent into madness: a result of desperately striving to fit into that unreachable Dick and Jane ideal and ultimately failing.

Following the primers, the following statement introduces the next section of the book: “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow” (Morrison 3). It's a startling sentence, and as you'll see, it's chock-full of things to think about.

The first word in this stanza is "silent," which could be a reference to Morrison's apprehensions about the Black Arts Movement. “Why is it so loud?” is a question the author asks her interviewer in “Toni Morrison Talks About Her Writing Motivation,” thus “quiet” is the logical antithesis. This could be the first indication that the book will not fit in with the rest of the movement's output. The fact that the voice belongs to a woman is the second. It contradicts the BAM's general tendency to emphasize masculine power. Instead, the novel will focus on a black neighborhood, particularly the story of a young girl, and the narrator will be a woman.

The fact that most of the characters, including the narrator, are African American women is crucial to the plot. Morrison herself puts it this way:

> *The opening phrase of the first sentence, ‘Quiet as it’s kept,’ had several attractions for me. First, it was a familiar phrase, familiar to me as a child listening to adults; to black women conversing with one another, telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about someone or event within the circle, the family, the neighborhood. (208)*

The author aspires to write in a female and black voice. Morrison has emphasized in various interviews how she writes in a way that blends African American oral traditions and general culture. Nellie McKay, she tells her,

> *Black people have a story, and that story has to be heard. There was an articulate literature before there was print. There were griots. They memorized it. People heard it. It is important that there is sound in my books–that you can hear it, that I can hear it. So, I am inclined not to use adverbs, not because I am trying to write a play, but because I want to try to give the dialogue a certain sound. (Morrison 427)*

Morrison is reminding us that white and black cultures have endured in diverse ways over time. The dominant white culture has placed a premium on having a presence on the written page. Writing has, in some ways, separated itself from the spoken word. African and Native American literatures, which are still influenced by oral traditions, do not function in the same way. Because they rely on a strong oral and storytelling tradition, such books are usually not only read, but also heard. As the novelist claims that she wants her work to be mainly African American, she ensures that she incorporates the oral storytelling tradition as well as other African American oral qualities–such as rhythm, inflections, and musicality–into her works.

For example, in the scene in *The Bluest Eye* where a group of black women are conversing while attending Aunt Jimmy's funeral, both orality and storytelling are evident.

> *"What'd she die from?" "Essie's pie."*
> *"Don't say?"*
> *"Uh-huh. She was doing fine, I saw her the very day before. Said she wanted me to bring her some black thread to patch some things for the boy. I should of known just from her wanting black thread that was a sign."*
> *"Sure was."*
> *"Just like Emma. 'Member? She kept asking for thread. Dropped dead that very evening."*
> *"Yeah. Well, she was determined to have it. Kept on reminding me. I told her I had some to home, but naw, she wanted it new. So I sent Li'l June to get some that very morning when she was laying dead. I was just fixing to bring it over, 'long with a piece of sweet bread. You know how she craved my sweet bread."*
> *"Sure did. Always bragged on it. She was a good friend to you."*
> *"I believe it. Well, I had no more got my clothes on when Sally bust in the door hollering about how Cholly here had been over to Miss Alice saying she was dead. You could have knocked me over, I tell you." "Guess Essie feels mighty bad."*

> *"Oh, Lord, yes. But I told her the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Wasn't her fault none. She makes good peach pies. But she bound to believe it was the pie did it, and I'spect she right."*
> *"Well, she shouldn't worry herself none 'bout that. She was just doing what we all would of done."*
> *"Yeah. 'Cause I was sure wrapping up that sweet bread, and that could of done it too."*
> *"I doubts that. Sweet bread is pure. But a pie is the worse thing to give anybody ailing. I'm surprised Jimmy didn't know better."*
>
> *"If she did, she wouldn't let on. She would have tried to please. You know how she was. So good."*
>
> *"I'll say (...)" (*Morrison *138–140)*

This conversation is rich in a variety of ways. For starters, it definitely incorporates storytelling. Morrison tells McKay that she wants to capture black people's imagination through her art. According to the author, African Americans can navigate easily through the practical, logical side of everyday life, while at the same time maintaining a supernatural view of things. In her opinion, this ability makes the world larger for black people (Morrison 428). The scene depicting Aunt Jimmy's burial exemplifies this contradiction.

The women discussing her death are the same ones that cleaned her house, notified everyone of her passing, knitted her a white wedding dress, for she was a maiden lady, and looked after the young Cholly (Morrison 138).

None of these activities stopped the women from believing that Essie's pie was to blame for Aunt Jimmy's death and that her yearning for black thread was a harbinger of her coming destiny. This is not, as some science-oriented individuals may believe, stupid superstition, but wisdom passed down through centuries that can direct and save African Americans' lives. Aunt Jimmy may have declined the pie because she knew how harmful it could be for someone who was sick, as the women speculate. They say she was too sweet to do it, but she did have the information, which has proven to be invaluable in their community.

The oral quality of black speech is also visible in this section. Morrison presents patterns that are traditionally African American, not just in her accent, tone, and diction. The first is call-and-response, in which the listener always responds to the speaker's statement (call) (Wu; Yang 1143–1145; Moses 135–137). Call-and-response is utilized when one of Aunt Jimmy's friends

replies "Don't say?" to the knowledge that Essie's pie killed the old woman and "Sure was" to the black thread omen.

The blues, as Moses argues, is another generally oral – or, in this case, musical – legacy that runs through *The Bluest Eye* (Moses 125–126). It's most noticeable at first in passages like Claudia's reminiscences about her mother's singing voice. Her voice was so lovely, according to the narrator, that she made sorrow attractive, leaving a young Claudia with "a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (Morrison 23–24).

In an interview with LeClair, Morrison says she's seeking for a method to depict African Americans and their values in her work, to nourish them, and to assist conserve what was there before white dominance intervened:

> *There has to be a mode to do what the music did for blacks, what we used to be able to do with each other in private and in that civilization that existed underneath the white civilization. I think this accounts for the address of my books. (...) All that is in the fabric of the story in order to do what the music used to do. The music kept us alive, but it's not enough anymore. My people are being devoured. (...) I wanted to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power. (Morrison "Language". Web.)*

Claudia and Pecola may be distinguished by their sense of being kept alive through music. Claudia has communal knowledge conveyed to her through lyrics that come through a beloved voice and that show her that sorrow is endurable and may even be bittersweet, but the latter does not have a strong familiar hold to support her and does not draw strength from shared memories or music. If we relate this to Aunt Jimmy's funeral scene, we may deduce that Claudia is someone who has heard from her mother and other ladies that pies are bad for the sick and should avoid them. Pecola, on the other hand, being an outcast and outsider, would never be aware of the perils of eating a pie.

The Bluest Eye's narrative framework is likewise linked to the blues aesthetics by Moses. According to the author, blues lyrics begin with loss and go to a possible resolution of sadness through motion (Moses 125), which Claudia does. She begins with Pecola's awful tragedy and appears to have discovered fresh answers at the end of the tale. Claudia does not let the black little girl's narrative be forgotten by testifying about her–another African American oral tradition

(Moses 126; 137). She creates solutions for the community to move forward by remembering and repeating what happened to Pecola. As a result, Morrison proposes alternatives for healing.

The novel is organized as follows: it begins with three different variations of the Dick and Jane prime characters. Then, like a narrator, Claudia MacTeer introduces herself and warns us of the awful tragedy she is about to convey. Following that, there are four seasonal portions, all of which are recounted in the first person by Claudia and recall incidents she had with Frieda and Pecola as a youngster. Seven primer pieces, which use lines from the Breedlove version of the Dick and Jane prime and are narrated by a variety of voices, cut across these seasonal sections. Claudia dwells over the story's result and considers what might be gained from it in a kind of echo towards the end of the novel (145–146).

Not only is *The Bluest Eye*'s structure disjointed, but so are its narrative voices. Claudia's childhood voice, Claudia's adult insights, a third-person narrator who tells stories about the Breedlove family and the community around them, the point of view of characters like Soaphead Church, Cholly, and Pauline, the presence of Pauline's first-person narration, and, by the end, a dialogue (or monologue) between a descended-into-madness Pecola and her imaginary friend.

The reader must painstakingly piece together the parts of the story, thinking on the various perspectives offered, in order to grasp what happened, thanks to the fractured structure and voices. This avoids the convenience of blaming Cholly, for example.

In fact, witnessing his memories reveals him from a new perspective: he is not only a perpetrator of violence, but also a victim. The range of voices and tales also helps to prevent a totalizing perspective, which Morrison believes is crucial given the diversity of African Americans and their culture (Morrison "Art." Web).

At first glance, the novel's sections are divided into seasons, which assist to place Pecola's tragedy in the context of a year. It also alluded to the cycle repeating itself in their town: the narrative begins in the Autumn of the year Pecola is raped. The MacTeer sisters most likely planted the marigolds the next Fall– and neither Pecola's baby nor the flowers survived. This recurrence of catastrophes could be due to their community's continued awe for the white beauty ideal. The destructive cycle of self-hatred had not been broken.

Claudia's version of Pecola's account, on the other hand, appears to reveal some significant changes. Autumn is the following season in the story, as Summer is the last one we witness. It's called renewal, and I believe Morrison argues in *The Bluest Eye* that it's time for certain ideas to die so that others might flourish. Claudia is ready to let go of poisonous concepts and plant nurturing ideals when Autumn returns, according to the novel's ending in Summer.

2.2 Maureen Peal, Geraldine and Pauline Breedlove: racial passing, self-loathing and the white standards of beauty

One of the most notable references Morrison makes in the novel is to John M. Stahl's film Imitation of Life (1934):

> *"I just moved here. My name is Maureen Peal. What's yours?" "Pecola."*
>
> *"Pecola? Wasn't that the name of the girl in Imitation of Life?" "I don't know. What is that?"*
>
> *"The picture show, you know. Where this mulatto girl hates her mother cause she is black and ugly but then cries at the funeral. It was real sad. Everybody cries in it. Claudette Colbert too."*
>
> *"Oh." Pecola's voice was no more than a sigh.*
>
> *"Anyway, her name was Pecola too. She was so pretty. When it comes back, I'm going to see it again. My mother has seen it four times." (*Morrison *65)*

Delilah, a black lady, works for Bea, a white woman, and helps her get wealthy by making excellent pancakes Bea commercializes. Delilah is a submissive woman who has a lighter complexion than her mother and a daughter named Peola. Peola, in fact, begins passing at a young age, adopting a white persona and presenting herself to others in that manner.

as Werrlein claims Morrison is doing more than establishing a broken link between Peola and Pecola by giving the daughter a name that is inspired by, but not identical to, the main character's name. She's also signifying (Werrlein 203). Moses describes signifying as a black tradition in which the speaker is mocked or insulted by the audience (Moses 135–136). In a way, this is another form of abuse that the child suffers, as her own name might be interpreted as an attack and a terrible irony. It demonstrates how Pecola will never be Peola, despite their shared ambition to possess white beauty standards. The similarities between them, however, cease there.

While the film's protagonist appears to be white to others, the novel's girl has very dark skin, which the world around her notices and reminds her of.

As a result, her wish will never come true. Morrison's criticism of Pecola's tyranny may also be evidenced by the fact that her name implies she would never be able to have the blue eyes she so desperately desires. Her name is not her own; it was bestowed to her by someone else. Similarly, the belief that she is unworthy is based on the ideals of a society that emphasizes white people–that is, it has an external source. It's not unexpected that Pauline Breedlove named her kid after a character from a Hollywood film. After all, she was only ever pleased when she was in the picture show at one point in her life (Morrison 121).

However, it also reveals Pauline's sentiments towards blackness and whiteness. Peola from Imitation of Life is characterized as a stunning young lady who might easily pass for white. The film's clear message is that the closer one gets to being white, the more lovely one becomes. Pauline, who had learned to "equate physical beauty with virtue" (120), seemed to want her daughter to be attractive.

To a white audience, Peola may appear ungrateful and egotistical. It may seem unusual that someone would want their daughter to be like her because she betrays and abandons her mother. Pauline, on the other hand, understood Peola's point of view and the situation she was in: in order to be accepted by the dominant society, one had to be attractive. As a result, it was exactly what she wanted for her child.

Pauline was delighted about the baby she was going to have during her second pregnancy: she chatted to it and built an emotional bond with it (122–124). Nonetheless, she couldn't help but imagine what her child would look like–and when Pecola was born, she looked nothing like Pauline had imagined (123). The mother acknowledged that her child was intelligent, but she exclaimed, "Lord, she was ugly" (124). It didn't matter that Pecola appeared to be smart because Pauline internalized beauty as a virtue–and the most important one to possess– She was not good enough since she was unattractive.

If Pecola can be linked to Peola's desire to conform to white beauty standards in *The Bluest Eye*, she is far from alone. Maureen Peal, Geraldine, and Pauline are all women who aspire to be associated with the white dominant society and escape their blackness. Maureen Peal is the new

girl at school, and Claudia describes her as a "high-yellow dream child" who is wealthy by their community's standards (Morrison 60). Then, in a way, she's like Peola: her skin color allows her to pass if she wants to, and many around her think she's gorgeous. Maureen's family, like the character in Imitation of Life, is wealthy. Delilah did not amass as much wealth as Bea, but she had enough to ensure that she and Peola could live well and that the daughter would have good things. Maureen wore excellent clothes to school and ate a lot of snacks, according to Claudia (60–61).

"The dominant culture achieves and maintains its prominence because of its wealth; hence, the values it promotes tend to be monetary ones" says Gravett (Gravett 92). The author also claims that "those unable to afford the material lifestyle society values are ruthlessly pushed aside" as the Breedloves were (92).

The reader is educated about the family's household in the first Breedlove portion of the Dick and Jane classic, for example. When the Breedloves first moved here, they bought a new sofa, but the fabric had split by the time it was delivered, and the store refused to take responsibility (Morrison 34). The displeasure of possessing a broken sofa and still having to pay for it made the Breedloves tremendously unhappy, as the narrator says, and that feeling of misery spread throughout the house and into their lives (34–35). As a result, part of what makes the Breedloves outcasts is their inability to acquire excellent material items.

Another feature that distinguishes Maureen and Pecola is their wealth disparity. Both are tiny girls, but the first can come considerably closer to the dominant society's beauty standards–both due to her skin color and her social circumstances. The youngest Breedlove is a small child who does not receive affection from her family. All of these elements, when combined, appear to contribute to Maureen Peal's ability to describe herself as "cute," whereas Pecola is "black and ugly" (71). People like Maureen Peal because she can pass for white and has money, which allows her to become closer to the prevalent ideals of beauty:

> *She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids. She never had to*

search for anybody to eat with in the cafeteria–they flocked to the table of her choice (...) (Morrison 60–61)

It's easy to see why Maureen isn't the only character in the story who wants to emulate behaviors taught in the Dick and Jane primes and in the movies after seeing how much nicer someone who approaches the white dominating beauty standard is treated. Geraldine does it as well.

Geraldine is "one of those girls who is interested in getting rid of the funkiness," according to the third-person narrator (79–84).

Passion, nature, and a wide spectrum of emotions are thought to be involved in this funkiness. It is visible in women who laugh loudly, pronounce clearly, make large gestures, sway while walking, and have thick lips and curly hair (81).

Funkiness is intimately associated with traditional African American images or features, as can be deduced. Women like Geraldine, who reject their black identity and want to conform to white standards, go to great lengths to hide their funkiness in their appearances and behavior.

The narrator who informs us about these females seemed to be critical of their behavior. “Geraldine can’t change her race, but she can try to change her culture, and this process is described as loss rather than a gain or transformation” (Douglas 212).

Despite the fact that the narrator appears to condemn Geraldine and other women like her, she also praises them (Dittmar 79). When this type of girl is described at first, it appears like the narrator is praising them. As Dittmar points out, “mostly it is the information which emerges later that challenges this seduction” (79).

It's significant that both Maureen and Geraldine are described as attractive but are involved in cruel actions. With Maureen and Geraldine, the narrator appears to be attacking Pauline's belief in physical beauty as a sign of virtue.

Pecola is bullied by a lovely little girl, and the youngest Breedlove is abused by a gorgeous woman–two behaviors that do not sound virtuous. Furthermore, the process of attempting to conform to white society's definition of beauty entails rejecting and denying typical African

American characteristics. As a result, the narrator appears to be pitting black ideals against the white notion of beauty.

Pauline has a different relationship with the white standard of beauty than Maureen and Geraldine. While the latter two have been looking for it their entire lives, Pauline finally came face to face with it after relocating to Ohio (Morrison 114). Her childhood was spent in Alabama, while her adolescent years were spent in Kentucky. Despite the fact that her life had not been flawless in any of those places, she had her family, listened to African American music, and had a happy relationship with Cholly (108–114). However, when she and Cholly relocated to Ohio, everything changed, as she tells us. It was difficult to make friends there, and she missed her neighborhood and felt quite lonely.

Pauline also claims that there were much more whites and less colored people than in the South (115). In her words, "Northern folks was different too (…) No better than white for their meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count, except I didn't expect it from them" (115).

The other black women teased her about not straightening her hair and the way she spoke. Pauline began working to buy new clothes in try to impress them, and she and Cholly began fighting more frequently–both over money and because they were losing touch with one another (116). She eventually began going to the movies, where she was more excluded from her African American roots by white concepts:

> *Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another– physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap (120)*

Pauline began to aspire to the life models she saw on screen when she went to the movies. One of the images she saw in the movies was

> *White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. (121)*

Pauline and Cholly's marriage was no longer happy at that point. Since the man began spending his money on alcohol and asked his wife for hers, they had a lot of fights (Morrison 118). Pauline felt unhappy with herself and Cholly when she compared her life to that of the ladies who received gifts from their husbands, and Cholly to those cinematic white men who could solely provide for their families. Some black women at the time "have equated manhood with the ability of men to be sole economic providers in the family, and (…) feel cheated and betrayed by black men who refuse to assume this role" according to bell hooks, and this is a show of acceptance and support (hooks 129).

According to the author, African American males who were not the family's breadwinner were viewed as irresponsible, indolent, and weak by their wives. This perception, according to her, did not imply that women disliked male dominance, but rather that they were supporting patriarchy and rejecting their husbands if they did not participate in its system (129–130).

Pauline comes to perceive patriarchy as ideal by watching white families in movies, and she is frustrated that her life does not meet it.

Pauline knew she would never be able to fit into the white standard of beauty after losing one of her front teeth. She was quite dark-skinned, having been raised in the country, and lacked financial resources. If she could never live up to Western white ideals, unlike Maureen and Geraldine, who were able to successfully copy white lifestyles and be deemed attractive, she determined that her own life and family were not important. Pauline began devoting practically all of her time to her job at the Fischers'–a white family:

> *More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man– they were like the afterthoughts one has just before sleep, the early- morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely (*Morrison *125)*

Pauline thought she was happy and responsible in their home. She believed their home was beautiful, orderly, and clean, and that it was an example of a decent and correct living. She was grateful and felt gratified when her bosses said, "Really, she is the ideal servant" (126).

Another direct similarity to Imitation of Life is Pauline's satisfaction in servitude: much like Delilah is delighted to devote her life to visiting Bea, Pauline finds meaning in serving the

Fishers. If she and her kid can't be Peola and live in a white-like family, she can at least serve a white family and live in their world.

Morrison demonstrates how harmful assimilation is by contrasting Pauline's relatively pleasant living while in touch with her community in Alabama and Kentucky with her self-loathing while despising her own family and attempting to follow white standards. One of the reasons Pauline disconnects herself from her roots is that beauty is "one of the most destructive ideals in the history of human thought" (Morrison 120).

Pauline, cut off from her community and yearning for white ways of life, causes harm to herself and others, particularly her family, as a result of her self-hatred.

Maureen, Geraldine, and Pauline are three ladies who try to evade and escape the funkiness that is associated with blackness. They do not participate in healing by refusing to accept their community and culture. Rather, they cause harm to themselves and others.

2.3 Cholly Breedlove: The Oppressed Turn Into Oppressor

Bell Hooks claims in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* that “in patriarchal society, men are encouraged to channel frustrated aggression in the direction of those without power–women and children” (hooks 145). Cholly Breedlove's opinions reflect this misdirected rage.

The character's background chapter demonstrates how he focuses his oppressors' animosity against someone he can oppress. When he was fourteen, he went on a walk with Darlene, a girl he admired, while attending the funeral of Aunt Jimmy–his only maternal figure– (Morrison 140–143). They were alone in an open field when they became drawn to each other and had their first sexual experience. Two white males with a torch and a flashlight, however, interrupted them. When Cholly motioned to stop what he and Darlene were doing, those men called him a "nigger" and instructed him to " get on wid it" (145–146).

Fearful of them, the young Breedlove complied, but his kindness and joy had vanished: “with a ferocity born of powerlessness, he pulled her dress up, removed his trousers and underwear” (146).

Cholly despised Darlene at the time, and desired he could be at ease enough in their sexual act to make it painful for her (Morrison 146). Cholly called her "girl" and stroked her leg with his foot to signal that they should leave after the two men left, not hiding how appalled he was by her at that time. The youngster was angry because he hadn't been able to stop the white men from making fun of them, but because he couldn't stop them, he aimed his rage at the girl. According to the narrator,

> *Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess–that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. (148–149)*

Cholly is clearly the oppressor in the case described above. He is, nonetheless, a victim of oppression. “men too are victimized,” says Hooks, and “to be an oppressor is dehumanizing and anti-human in nature” (hooks 158). Patriarchy, according to the author, causes fathers to act like monsters, husbands and lovers to rape, brothers to feel ashamed for caring for their sisters, and “denies all men the emotional life that would act as a humanizing, self-affirming force in their lives” (158).

Cholly seemed to lose a large part of his connection to his community when he was fourteen, similar to what Pauline would later experience. Aunt Jimmy, who had been quite fond of him, had died. Those men who exposed and humiliated them took away his care for Darlene. Cholly left Georgia and his lone buddy, an old man named Blue Jack (Morrison 130–150), fearful of getting the girl pregnant and afraid to travel to his distant uncle's place. He went for his father, but he was rejected and showed little desire in finding out who he was (153–154). Cholly emerged as a "free man" who did whatever he pleased and was capable of acts of love and brutality after all of these experiences of abandonment and loneliness (157–158). The narrator says “the pieces of Cholly’s life could become coherent only in the head of a musician” (157).

At first glance, this passage seems that Cholly Breedlove would be understandable to musicians. However, there could be more to his being a "free man" and the narrator's mention of music as a means of achieving coherence. Cholly may be more loose than free because he is isolated from his community as a result of his freedom.

If Claudia has gained insight into communal knowledge and learned that pain can be tolerated by listening to her mother sing Blues songs, and Morrison believes in the healing music can promote for African Americans, this narrator is implying that getting in touch with black traditions and values can help Cholly.

He instead heads north, becoming upset when he is unable to follow the Western white patriarchal norm of being the head of his family and providing for them. Cholly had no notion how to be a father because he didn't know how to experience this emotional life (Morrison 158). The Breedlove guy rapes his eleven-year-old daughter out of a mixture of disgust and devotion. He desired to " break her neck–but tenderly" and rape her tenderly (159; 160–161).
One of the things he mulls about is what he should do about Pecola's affection for him:

> *What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? How? What could his calloused hands produce to make her smile? What of his knowledge of the world and of life could be useful to her? What could his heavy arms and befuddled brain accomplish that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? (159–160)*

Claudia says at the end of the story " love is never any better than the lover", and "the love of a free man is never safe" (204). Cholly may not have known what world information to pass on to his daughter because he was no longer in contact with the African American culture. Perhaps he didn't know what to make with his hands because he hadn't been taught the customs. He may not have been able to achieve something that would allow him to respect himself because he was living by the example of others. Perhaps a free man's love isn't secure since he can't help someone else connect to those around them because he doesn't feel like a part of a community. Cholly is thus a victim of oppression who perpetuates the violence by perpetrating it against people in more vulnerable positions than himself.

2.4 Pecola: The Destroyed Black Little Girl

Werrlein points out that one of the differences between Pecola and Peola is the spelling of their names in her work "Not So Fast, Dick and Jane." The letter "C" in Pecola's can be interpreted as "see" (Werrlein 204).

The paragraph in which Pecola wishes she could make her visible body disappear reveals Pecola's problems with her visible body:

> *"Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand. "Please make me disappear." She squeezed her eyes shut. Little parts of her body faded away. Now slowly, now with a rush. Slowly again. Her fingers went, one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow. Her feet now. Yes, that was good. The legs all at once. It was hardest above the thighs. She had to be real still and pull. Her stomach would not go. But finally it, too, went away. Then her chest, her neck. The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (*Morrison *43)*

Her eyes are the one part of her body that Pecola can't make disappear. Because the "C" ("see") will never go away, the girl will never be Peola. She will never be acknowledged as attractive in the manner that the character in Imitation of Life is, nor will she ever be considered a subject. Almost all of the people who explicitly criticize her comment on her visibility and unattractiveness–thoughts of her being ugly are presented by a range of personalities.

Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant storekeeper, for example, stares at Pecola with disgust and "the total absence of human recognition" in his gaze (46–47). The small girl assumes that he dislikes her because she is black. Yacobowski is unpleasant to her and hesitates to touch her in order to collect the money she provides to buy candies (46–48). When the little girl walks out of the store, embarrassed, she notices dandelions. She used to think they were lovely and couldn't understand why they were called weeds. After being rejected and assessed by Mr. Yacobowski's gaze, she now considers the flowers to be unattractive (45; 48). Pecola, in other terms, internalizes the opinions and viewpoints of others.

When Maureen Peal bullies Pecola, the adjective "ugly" surfaces once more. To persuade the youngest Breedlove to talk, the light-skinned girl had pretended to be polite to her. Maureen begins an interrogation after purchasing Pecola ice cream. Its goal is to determine whether or not what the lads at school were saying about Pecola seeing her father naked was accurate (68–71). The MacTeers sisters come to stop Maureen, sensing her motives and Pecola's unease, and an altercation ensues. Peal's ultimate attack is "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (69–71). Pecola is once again made aware of what others think of her, and that

it is all based on her physical looks. Because she isn't white and isn't deemed attractive, others believe they can mock her.

Geraldine's son is Junior. He despises his mother because she refuses to show him affection in favor of her cat. Because he knows he can't confront the woman, he directs his rage onto the animal and others who are weaker than him, such as Pecola (Morrison 84–86).

When he sees the youngest Breedlove walk in front of his house one afternoon, he thinks to himself, “nobody ever played with her. Probably, he thought, because she was ugly” (86). Junior then proceeds to entice the girl in, only to shock and injure her by throwing the cat at her face. Instead, the youngster becomes enraged and kills the cat just as the two appear to be getting along. When his mother comes, he accuses Pecola of being the cause. Geraldine screams at her and refers to her as a "nasty little black bitch" (86–90). The words "ugly" and "black" are used once more as justifications and offenses against the youngest Breedlove.

Pauline states that when Pecola was born she “knowed she was ugly” (124). Claudia was enraged by the fact that the young white Fischer girl called Pauline "Polly" but Pecola was only permitted to call her mother "Mrs. Breedlove" when the MacTeer sisters came to visit the Fischers' house to talk to Pecola (104–106). Pauline is enraged when Pecola accidentally knocks over a pan of deep-dish berry cobbler. She doesn't seem to mind that her daughter has burned herself; she hits her and yells at her (106–107). When Pecola is raped by her father and becomes pregnant, a lady says, "They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself" in a similar harsh manner (187). Since one of Pauline's first impressions when Pecola was born was that she was unattractive, it appears that this is one of the reasons she doesn't show or even feel care for her daughter. Instead, she adores the tiny white Fischer girl, who embodies the dominant society's beauty ideal. When Pauline is raped by Cholly, she also hits Pecola, thus we can presume that the lady blames the girl for what happened–as women are usually blamed when they are sexually assaulted. Pecola is abused yet again because she is black, "ugly," and feminine. When Pecola travels to Soaphead Church to plead for blue eyes near the end of the tale, the man thinks to himself, “here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (172). He bemoans the fact that he'll never be able to heal her, demonstrating that he doesn't believe darkness can ever be beautiful.

The old guy just employs Pecola to kill a dog that is bothering him, despite his apparent willingness to help her. Innocently, the girl feeds the poison Soaphead Church gave her to the dog, believing the creature's convulsion is a sign that the magic has worked and she now has her desired blue eyes.

Soaphead Church is the fourth individual to think or refer to Pecola as "ugly." Despite the fact that Yacobowski and Geraldine do not use the word, it is evident that they both find the girl unattractive merely on the basis of her appearance.

However, there is one more person who thinks Pecola is unattractive: the girl herself. Pecola believes she cannot escape her unhappiness because “as long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people " when upset by Cholly and Pauline's tumultuous disputes (Morrison 43). Pecola prays for blue eyes in order to be more like Shirley Temple, Mary Jane, or the Fischer girl, because she is constantly exposed to the worship of white idols and icons such as Shirley Temple and Mary Jane, and sees how everyone seems to adore them. Perhaps the girl aspires to be adored in this manner.

Pecola claims she has blue eyes after attending Soaphead Church. The girl is shattered, as evidenced by the fact that she now has two selves: one who she sees to be her genuine self–with blue eyes–and one who she perceives to be her imaginary buddy. Even though she now believes she has blue eyes, it does not appear to be enough:

> *Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.*
>
> *That’s just too bad, isn’t it? Please help me look.*
>
> *No.*
>
> *But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough?*
>
> *Blue enough for what? Blue enough for…I don’t know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough…for you!*
>
> *I’m not going to play with you*
> *anymore. Oh. Don’t leave me.*
>
> *Yes. I am.*
>
> *Why? Are you mad at me? Yes.*

Because my eyes aren't blue enough? Because I don't have the bluest eyes?

No. Because you're acting silly.

Don't go. Don't leave me. Will you come back if I get them? Get what?

The bluest eyes. Will you come back then?

Of course I will. I'm just going away for a little while. You promise?

Sure. I'll be back. Right before your very eyes.

*(*Morrison *201–202)*

Pecola is yearning for affection and someone who will stay with her, as can be observed. If she doesn't have the bluest eyes, the girl believes she'll be left alone once more. This chapter demonstrates how Pecola will never be able to achieve white beauty standards since she will be continually chasing them. If blue eyes–that is, the white concept of beauty–cannot work for her and make her liked, it appears that healing an African American identity is not the right solution.

2.5 Claudia and a new alternative for the "Black is Beautiful" slogan

Despite the fact that *The Bluest Eye* is a multitextual and polyphonic work, author Carl Malmgren claims that Claudia MacTeer is solely responsible for its organization (Malmgren 146–151). Cholly is referred to as a "free man" in two different passages: the first is in Cholly's section of the Breedlove version of the Dick and Jane primer, narrated in the third person, and the second is in Cholly's section of the Breedlove version of the Dick and Jane primer, narrated in the first person. The second is narrated in the first person by an adult MacTeer woman in Claudia's coda. If Claudia is the persona in charge of the plot, she can only relate the coda to Cholly's introduction part (150).

That assessment appears to be in line with Morrison's statement regarding her books:

"I want very much to have every book I write end with knowledge (...) You begin at a certain place, a literary journey, and at the very end there has to be the acquisition of knowledge which is virtue, which is good, which is helpful–somebody knows

> *something at the end that they did not know before." (Morrison "Goodness". Web)*

In this example, someone does not appear to be referring only to the reader. Claudia MacTeer also seemed to have learned something during *The Bluest Eye*'s story. She states at the start of the work that there is nothing further that can be said about Pecola's story but the reasons for it to have happened. Despite the narrator's assertion that the focus will remain on how events happened since "why is difficult to handle" (Morrison 4), both how and why appear to be analyzed throughout the book.

Claudia is the character in the narrative who struggles the most against the imposition of white beauty standards. Shirley Temple was adored by Pecola and Frieda, but Claudia despised her. Shirley Temple was hated by the girl not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, an African American tap dancer and actor. He was Claudia's friend, uncle, and daddy, and he should have been dancing and laughing with her, according to Claudia (17). Claudia despised Shirley Temple not because she couldn't emulate her like Pecola wished, but because she felt Temple was stealing something–or someone, in this case–that she felt belonged to her, to her culture. Claudia concentrates her admiration on an African American figure, whereas Pecola and the majority of the people in the narrative seem keen on clinging to the Shirley Temples, Mary Janes, and other white models.

The youngest MacTeer's aversion to blond blue-eyed dolls reflects her opposition to white beauty standards. She ponders how everyone else seemed to want them, and how adults believed they'd be the ideal gift. Claudia's primary interest in the toys, however, was dismantling them to see if she could figure out why everyone appeared to adore them (17–19). The mention of dolls in *The Bluest Eye*, as Douglas proposes, could be a reference to a test devised by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. They asked sixteen black youngsters in segregated schools to compare and contrast white and black dolls. Ten indicated they favored white dolls, eleven thought black dolls were "awful," nine said white toys were "good," and seven claimed white dolls were the most like themselves (Douglas 216). Morrison uses the dolls to point out that black hasn't always been viewed as beautiful, and to warn about the dangers of assimilation without criticism. Morrison deconstructs the image of white superiority by dismembering the dolls, but she doesn't stop there. Claudia is deconstructing the fundamental notion of beauty by reducing the dolls to pieces in attempt to find the source of the beauty without discovering it. As Malmgren puts it,

> *the text composed by the adult Claudia, The Bluest Eye, carries on the same discovery procedure on a grander scale; it undertakes the deconstruction and demystification of the ideology that makes those dolls beautiful. (Malmgren 154)*

The pursuit of beauty standards is once again promoted as a potentially healthier alternative to African American heritage. Claudia states that she did not want white dolls for Christmas, and if someone had asked her what she really wanted, she would have answered

> *I wanted rather to feel something on Christmas day. The real question would have been, "Dear Claudia, what experience would you like on Christmas?" I could have spoken up, "I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama's kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone." The lowness of the stool made for my body, the security and warmth of Big Mama's kitchen, the smell of the lilacs, the sound of the music, and, since it would be good to have all of my senses engaged, the taste of a peach, perhaps, afterward. (*Morrison *19–20)*

Claudia aspired to feel linked to her culture and its traditions, rather than admiring or mimicking white ideals. She craved the comfort and familiarity of Big Mama's cuisine, as well as the sound of African American music. According to Moses, the MacTeer sisters' link to ancestral knowledge passed through songs, habits, and storytelling is critical to their survival, and its absence is one of the reasons for the Breedloves' demise (Moses 131–132).

Claudia, the narrator, admits to her readers that her hatred of white girls will be transformed into false love over time, and she would learn to revere Shirley Temple and joy in cleanliness. She does admit, however, that she recognized "the shift was adjustment without improvement" even as she was learning (Morrison 20–21). As a result, Claudia, the organizer of *The Bluest Eye*, is aware of the dangers of assimilation and opposes the adoption of white values. Her resistance is manifested in her affection for Pecola. Despite the fact that at least five characters call the girl unattractive, Claudia adds, "she was smiling, and since it was a rare thing to see on her, I was surprised at the pleasure it gave me" (104).

Claudia found joy in staring at Pecola even as a child, despite hearing from practically everyone that she was unattractive. She found the child to be delightful. The fact that the adult narrator tells her readers this proves that there are other points of view than the dominant one.

By the time Pecola is pregnant with Cholly's baby, another sign of Claudia's resistance has emerged. She recalls how worried she and her sister were for Pecola and her child, but that they seemed to be the only ones. According to her,

> *I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live–just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (*Morrison *188)*

Claudia's baby is dark-skinned, with large lips, curling hair, and velvety skin. It is a favorite of hers. The narrator states she wanted someone to desire for the baby's existence to counteract the worldwide love for white beauty standards, and she achieves this with her story, *The Bluest Eye*. The author suggests that healing can be reached through a connection to the community, in contrast to the hurt and pain that the very concept of beauty causes Pecola, and the power and understanding that African American values transfer to Claudia herself.

The fact that Pecola's story is being shared shows that the novel does not conclude on a bad note. Claudia says, very ominously, in the last paragraph 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. 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, much too late. (204)*

The mention of marigolds, flowers, and seeds, on the other hand, is not coincidental. Autumn is just on the corner, as the novel ends in the summer. It's planting season, which means new ideas and principles can sprout. When referring about girls like Pecola, the narrator says, "the end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between" (90).

Pecola's tragic demise can be viewed as the end of the world. All of the cruelty that those around her have done to the little child has ended up in the garbage. If the seeds of connection to

their heritage and African American values are established, the beginning of the world may arrive in Autumn.

The community will be able to recover in this way. The novel is Claudia's blues for Pecola and her neighborhood, as Moses indicates, and the typical blues lyrics include “a movement from an initial emphasis on loss to a concluding suggestion of resolution of grief through motion” (Moses 140; 125).

Claudia is performing the cathartic role of a storyteller by testifying to Pecola's story, attesting to the information she has gained over the years, fostering healing, and implying that the community's loss can be overcome if African American ideals are the seeds planted when the next Autumn arrives.

Conclusion

Morrison highly skepticized the "Black is Beautiful" slogan and the need for it. Something lovely will need the existence of something ugly, which will always exclude and injure someone. Morrison believes that the fact that whiteness is seen as the most essential or only sort of beauty is not the sole issue, but that the entire emphasis placed on this value is incorrect.

As a result, unlike BAM artists, the novelist does not appear to believe that connecting blackness with beauty is the greatest approach to value African American heritage. Beauty is, to her, just another form of assimilation of white ideals as the most important.

Morrison suggests that community-based traditions such as music (blues and jazz, for example) and storytelling can be more effective in instilling racial pride and a sense of connection to African American roots (seen in oral traditions such as call-and-response and in acts as signifying and testifying). Claudia, who learns about Black traditions by listening to her mother's blues and receives encouragement in her self-confidence from her sister Frieda, does not survive and grow up healthy in the novel by chance. Pecola, on the other hand, who is exclusively exposed to white values and does not learn to connect with African American traditions, is unable to find serenity or love.

After reading and producing this work, I believe Morrison's reference to "remaining touched but not moved" (Morrison VIII) is tied to an examination of our society's ideals. Should beauty be valued as highly as it is? Pecola thinks she's obtained her blue eyes towards the end of the book, but she still wants more: the bluest eyes she can get. After all, even for white people, beauty standards will always be unattainable. We will always be too heavy or too tall, and pursuing beauty as one of life's most desirable qualities will always result in self-hatred.

Morrison provides a solution by bringing love, tales, and connection to the community. Because the principal characters are African Americans, that community in *The Bluest Eye* is the African American community. After all, Pecola's request isn't the only reason for the bluest eye. The “eye” can be read as “I”: self, subject (Moses 126). The bluest may be understood as a reference to blues: a strong African American tradition. If Pecola believed that having the bluest eyes would heal her, Morrison appears to believe that a fully healed identity is more likely to arise from connection to community and others, and this is the message her story sends.

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