

The danger of beauty: Race and self-worth in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

This paper examines how Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* represents beauty as a racialised construct that determines who is permitted to feel worthy of love, safety, and belonging. Through close reading of Pecola Breedlove, Claudia MacTeer, Pauline Breedlove, Cholly Breedlove, and Soaphead Church, the paper traces how whiteness-as-beauty is manufactured through popular culture, transmitted across generations, and internalised until it becomes indistinguishable from self-worth itself. Drawing on Morrison's dual narrative structure and seasonal framework, the analysis argues that Pecola's psychological destruction results not from an individual flaw but from an accumulated social ideology enacted by nearly every character she encounters. The paper concludes that Morrison's refusal to grant Pecola redemption constitutes the novel's sharpest critique of a culture that assigns humanity according to appearance.

Keywords: Racialised beauty, Internalised racism, Self-worth, and Black girlhood

Introduction

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a broken fragment of a Dick-and-Jane primer, its cheerful sentences collapsing into nonsense as the punctuation and spacing disappear, followed almost immediately by Claudia's flat, adult admission that "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (Morrison 5). That collapse is not a stylistic accident. It is the announcement of a novel that will spend its entirety showing what happens when a single, narrow picture of family, home, and beauty is handed to children who can never fit inside it. Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old Black girl growing up in Lorain, Ohio, in the early 1940s, comes to believe that blue eyes would fix her life, her family, and her sense of self. Morrison does not present this belief as childish confusion alone; she presents it as the logical, almost inevitable result of a culture that has taught every character in the novel, Black and white, that whiteness is the measure of value and that a Black girl's face is a kind of failure. This paper argues that *The Bluest Eye* uses beauty as a weapon of racial hierarchy, showing how whiteness-as-beauty is manufactured, distributed, and absorbed until it becomes indistinguishable from self-worth, and how that absorption produces devastating, and in Pecola's case fatal, consequences.

The novel makes clear from its earliest pages that beauty in this world is not a neutral aesthetic judgment. It is manufactured and sold. Shirley Temple's dimpled face on a cup, the blond doll given to Claudia at Christmas, and the graceful image of Mary Jane on a candy wrapper all teach the girls of the novel what a lovable child looks like before they are old enough to question the lesson. Claudia MacTeer, the novel's child narrator, initially resists this instruction with an almost violent honesty; she confesses that she dismembers the white dolls she is given, not out of malice toward the toy but out of a desperate wish to locate the source of the adoration those dolls receive, an adoration she does not receive herself. Her resistance is important because it shows that the internalization of white beauty standards is not automatic or biological. It is taught,

reinforced, and rewarded, and it can, for a time, be refused. Claudia's later admission that she eventually learns to love Shirley Temple, the same way the other girls do, demonstrates how thoroughly the culture eventually wins even against a child who begins by fighting it.

Pecola never gets the chance to resist in the way Claudia does. From her first appearance, she is described by those around her, including her own mother, as an ugly child, and she absorbs this description as an unshakable fact about herself rather than an opinion imposed on her. Her fixation on blue eyes becomes, in effect, a prayer: if her eyes were blue, she reasons, the violence in her house would stop, her parents would no longer fight in front of her, and people would finally look at her with kindness instead of contempt or indifference. The tragedy Morrison constructs is that Pecola's logic is not irrational within the world the novel depicts. Everyone around her, from her schoolteachers to the shopkeeper who cannot bring himself to look directly at her, communicates that her Blackness itself is the source of her unworthiness. Pecola's condition is a devastating illustration of what W. E. B. Du Bois once described it as "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (Du Bois 8), except that Pecola has no other vantage point left from which to see herself at all. When she finally does receive, in her own mind, the blue eyes she has longed for, it comes at the cost of her sanity. Morrison denies the reader the comfort of a magical transformation and instead delivers a psychotic break, making unmistakably clear that the wish for whiteness, taken to its logical end, does not heal a person; it erases her.

Central to Morrison's argument is the character of Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother, whose own history reveals how beauty ideology is passed from one generation to the next. As a young woman, Pauline organises her entire sense of self around the movies she watches in darkened theatres, absorbing not only the plots but the standard of loveliness embodied by white film stars. She styles her hair to imitate them and measures her own worth against an impossible mirror. The novel suggests that this same afternoon at the

movies, in which Pauline loses a tooth and permanently associates her own body with ugliness and failure, marks the moment she resigns herself to a life she believes cannot include beauty, tenderness, or delight for someone who looks like her. Having internalised this verdict about herself, Pauline extends it to her daughter. She is tender and careful with the light-skinned child in the household where she works as a domestic servant, yet cold and often cruel toward Pecola, replicating the very hierarchy that wounded her onto the child who most needs her protection. Morrison is careful not to present Pauline simply as a villain. She is shown instead as a woman shaped by the same forces that shape Pecola, proof that internalised racism does not require individual malice to reproduce itself; it only requires an unexamined culture and no alternative source of affirmation. Cholly Breedlove's violence toward his daughter, though horrifying, is framed by the novel within this same logic of inherited shame. Morrison traces his own history of humiliation, including a childhood abandonment and an early sexual humiliation witnessed by white men who treated his private pain as entertainment. Cholly's rage, misdirected and destructive, is nonetheless connected by the novel to a broader pattern in which Black men, denied dignity by a racist society, turn unresolved anger toward those closest to them rather than toward the structures that produced it. Morrison does not excuse Cholly; she contextualises him, insisting that private cruelty within Black families cannot be understood apart from the public cruelty of a society that has already taught its members to despise Blackness. This refusal to separate the personal from the political is essential to understanding why beauty, in this book, is never simply about appearance. Beauty functions as a proxy for who is permitted to be loved, protected, and forgiven.

The community surrounding the Breedloves reinforces rather than interrupts this hierarchy. Geraldine, a middle-class Black woman obsessed with distancing herself and her son from what she calls "niggers," represents another response to the same pressure that destroys Pecola: rather than reject the standard, she polices it, performing a respectability built on distance from Blackness itself, including horror at her son's associating with a girl like Pecola. Even the three prostitutes who live above the Breedloves' storefront apartment, who might seem to exist outside respectable judgments, offer Pecola only affection without real protection. Morrison populates her novel with these varied responses, from active resistance in young Claudia, to weary resignation in Pauline, to aggressive assimilation in Geraldine, precisely to demonstrate that no single character's flaw explains Pecola's destruction. It is the accumulated weight of a shared belief system, expressed differently by nearly everyone Pecola encounters, that destroys her.

Morrison's formal choices reinforce her thematic argument. The novel is divided into four seasons, beginning with autumn and ending with summer, a structure that evokes natural cycles of growth even as the narrative refuses growth to its central character; Pecola does not develop so much as she disintegrates. The dual narration, alternating between Claudia's retrospective first-person voice and a distant third-person narrator who can enter other households, allows Morrison to show both the interior cost of racist beauty standards and their broader social machinery at once. Readers see Pecola from the outside as a

source of embarrassment and pity to her neighbours, and from Claudia's inside perspective, as a child whose suffering the adult narrator still carries decades later. This dual structure prevents the novel from reducing Pecola to a symbol; even as she becomes, for other characters, a repository for their own fears about ugliness and failure, Morrison's narrative insists on her interior reality, however fragmented it becomes by the novel's end.

It is worth emphasising that Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* during the late 1960s, publishing it in 1970, at a moment when the Black is Beautiful movement was actively challenging the very standards her novel dissects. Rather than write a novel that simply celebrates Blackness as an antidote to white supremacy, Morrison chose to examine the psychological wreckage produced by decades of the opposite message, tracing how deeply that message had lodged itself in ordinary households well before any movement arrived to contest it. This choice gives the novel a diagnostic purpose rather than a purely celebratory one. Morrison is less interested in offering an uplifting alternative image of Black beauty than in showing, with unflinching precision, how the absence of such an image, reinforced by media, commerce, and everyday social interaction, can hollow out a child from the inside.

The novel's continued relevance lies in its refusal to treat beauty as trivial. Scholars examining the text have consistently noted that Morrison frames white beauty ideals as an ideological apparatus rather than a matter of individual taste, one that assigns social value and psychological security unevenly across racial lines (Kuenz 424). Bell hooks similarly argues that the visual field, including who is represented as desirable and who is not, has functioned historically as a mechanism of racial domination in America, a claim that illuminates why Pecola's obsession with blue eyes is never merely personal vanity but a symptom of structural erasure. Later scholarship on the novel extends this reading, showing how Morrison connects the aesthetic hierarchy of the classroom, the cinema, and the marketplace to the intimate violence inside the Breedlove household, arguing that internalized racism operates simultaneously as a private psychological wound and a public ideological structure (Khan and Rahman 49). These perspectives confirm what the novel dramatizes: beauty standards are never simply about how a person looks, but about who is granted the right to be regarded as fully human.

Soaphead Church, the self-styled "Reader, Advisor, and Interpreter of Dreams" whom Pecola visits to ask for blue eyes, deserves attention as the novel's clearest embodiment of colourism's internal logic. A light-skinned man of mixed West Indian ancestry, he has spent his life believing his complexion entitles him to a superiority he has never achieved, and he has grown to despise the very human bodies, especially Black women's bodies, that fail his rigid standards of order and beauty. When Pecola arrives asking for the one thing he cannot give her, he tricks her into poisoning a neighbour's ageing dog so that she will believe a miracle has occurred, granting himself, in a grotesque parody of divine mercy, a wish he knows is impossible. Morrison uses Soaphead as a case study in what happens when a person builds his identity on proximity to whiteness; his cruelty toward Pecola is the same cruelty the whole society has practised, condensed into one man who believes himself to be doing her a kindness.

In the end, *The Bluest Eye* offers no rescue for Pecola, and that absence is the novel's sharpest argument. Had Morrison allowed her protagonist a late redemption, a moment of self-acceptance or external validation, the novel's critique of racialised beauty would lose much of its force. Instead, Morrison leaves readers with Claudia's haunted retrospective voice, admitting that the whole community used Pecola's suffering to feel better about their own condition, planting their own contempt for Blackness onto her and then flourishing, briefly, in the false safety of comparison. The marigolds that will not grow in Claudia's garden the year of Pecola's destruction become the novel's final, quiet indictment. Claudia, looking back as an adult, concludes that "this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (Morrison 206), a line that folds the entire novel's argument about race and beauty into a single image of a landscape engineered to let only certain lives flourish. Some forms of damage, Morrison insists, cannot be undone by love or regret once they have taken root in a culture built to despise its own children. Morrison's achievement is to make that damage impossible to look away from, insisting that the danger of beauty lies not in vanity but in the machinery that decides, long before any child is born, whose face will be called lovely and whose will not.

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