

Toni Morrison's Literary Employment of Ideal Beauty "The Bluest Eye"¹

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ABSTRACT

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

Keywords: *Ideal Beauty; Bluest Eyes; Slogan of Movement; Classmates.*

INTRODUCTION

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

Historical background

Life and career of Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born Chloe Anthony Wofford, the second of four children, to George and Ramah Wofford on February 18, 1931. Both of her parents came from sharecropping families who had moved North in pursuit of better living conditions in the early 1900s, and her father's family had faced a great deal of discrimination. Due to these bitter memories and the racial troubles he endured during his childhood, he maintained a strong distrust of whites throughout his lifetime. She was the only African American writer and one of the few women to have received the Nobel prize for literature. The announcement of her 1993 award cited her as a writer "who, in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality". In her acceptance speech Morrison emphasized the importance of language "partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as an agency – as an act with consequences". (Ryson, 2012: 10) .

Displayed an early interest in literature. Studied humanities at Howard and Cornell Universities, followed by an academic career at Texas Southern University, Howard University, Yale, and since 1989, a chair at Princeton University. She has also worked as an editor for Random House, a critic, and given numerous public lectures, specializing in African-American literature. She made her debut as a novelist in 1970, soon gaining the attention of both critics and a wider audience for her epic power, unerring ear for dialogue, and her poetically-charged and richly-expressive depictions of Black America. A member since 1981 of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, she has been awarded a number of literary distinctions, among them the Pulitzer Prize in 1988.

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Writing, styles and techniques

Morrison's parents encouraged her passion for reading, learning, and culture, as well as a confidence in her own abilities and attributes as woman. They educated Morrison before she was sent to school, and as an adolescent she became enthralled by classic literature, including Jane Austen, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Leo Tolstoy. In an interview with Jean Strouse, Morrison described her childhood experiences with literature: "Those books were not written for a little black girl in Lorain, Ohio, but they were so magnificently done that I got them anyway -- they spoke directly to me out of their own specificity." Morrison was especially impressed by the ability of her favorite authors to identify with and present their own cultural roots. Morrison graduated high school with honors in 1949 and went on to attend Howard University in Washington D.C. It was during this time that Morrison changed her name from "Chloe" to "Toni," (derived from her middle name, Anthony) so that her name would be easier to pronounce. Morrison was also a member of the Howard Repertory Theatre; their trips to perform gave her the opportunity to observe the African-American experience in the South. In 1953, she graduated from Howard University with a bachelor's degree in English and a minor in Classics. Morrison went on to pursue graduate studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. In 1955, she completed her master's thesis on the works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner and received a Master of Arts. (Ryson, 2012: 32)

Morrison's writings concentrate on rural Afro-American communities and on their cultural inheritance, which she explores with cold-blooded detail and vivid vocabulary. Her intricate writing style does not just tell the reader about issues concerning African-Americans instead she shows them. In *Beloved*, set in Ohio and a plantation in Kentucky, Morrison shows slavery through flashbacks and stories told by characters. Her word choices give the reader the sense on how slave masters viewed their slaves as savage animals. Her work is described as breath taking, leaving *Beloved* more than a story; it is a history, and it is a life of its own. (Mote, 1997, 112) .When she started producing fiction, she was editing other writers for the publishers Random House in New York and began to feel the lack of novels which spoke to readers such as herself. Beginning with *The Bluest Eye* (1969), her novels portray the psychic and social lives of African American women, as well as men, covering the trauma of slavery and its economic and psychological consequences during and after the 19th century. (Wood, 2015: 91). In all of her fiction, Toni Morrison explored the conflict between society and the individual. She showed how the individual who defies social pressures can forge a self by drawing on the resources of the natural world, on a sense of continuity within the family and within the history of a people, and on dreams and other unaccountable sources of psychic power. Her second novel, *Sula* (1973), provides a terse and vivid contrast between two black women, one a rebel and the other a conformist, whose stories and struggle to come to terms with one another and their community set the pattern for some of her later fiction. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is wider ranging historically and geographically and, unusually within Morrison's oeuvre, has a black male character, Milkman Dead, as its main protagonist. Here the elements of magic realism suggested in *Sula* are developed and Morrison draws on the African American myth of slaves escaping by flying away as an image of Milkman's discovery of his roots in a southern African American tradition. For this novel Morrison won the National Book Critics' Circle award.

Her play, *Dreaming Emmett*, was first performed in 1986. A film version of *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme, scripted by three other writers, and starring Oprah Winfrey, was released in 1998 to mixed reviews. An opera, *Margaret Garner*, based on the same story with a libretto by Morrison and music by the American composer Richard Daniel pour was premiered in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 2005, and received much more favourable notices. Morrison also wrote the lyrics for André Previn's song cycle *Honey and Me* (1992), for his *Four Songs for Soprano, Cello and Piano* (1995), and for Daniel pour's *Spirits in the Well* (1998). (Wood, 2015: 102)

Many readers and critics on both sides of the Atlantic regard her highest achievement to be *Beloved* (1987), the first novel in a trilogy chronicling black American small town and urban communities over the past 150 years. It is based on a factual incident that she uncovered while preparing a historical collection, *The Black Book* (1974), and explores the terrible impact of slavery, its brutality and its dehumanization, on a young mother who murders her child to prevent her being repossessed by the slave-owner from whom she has escaped. The mother and those who live with her are haunted by the memory of the dead child, and the novel is also a more general representation of the terrible history that continues to haunt African Americans, a history that must be confronted in all its anguish before black people can learn to love themselves and one another. (Gillespie, 2007: 6) throughout Morrison's novel she does not use whites for main characters. Often, she is criticize for this. She explains her choice of characters by "I look very hard for black fiction because I want to participate in developing a canon of black work. We've had the first rush of black entertainment, where blacks were writing for whites, and whites were encouraging this kind of self-flagellation. Now we can get down to the craft of writing, where black people are talking to black people." Furthermore, she stated "the Black narrative has always been understood to be a confrontation with some White people. I'm sure there are many of them. They're not terribly interesting to me. What is interesting to me is what is going on within the

community. And within the community, there are no major White players. Once I thought, 'What is life like if they weren't there?' Which is the way I- we lived it, the way I lived it." (Mote, 1997, 119) .

Morrison's upbringing has additionally contributed to her character choice, themes in her novel and how she views white people. Her father was the main contributor towards her outlook on whites. Morrison has described her father's racist attitude towards whites and events in her childhood in interviews. When she was two years old her family's home was set on fire while they were in it. "People set our house on fire to evict us...", said Morrison. Her father became even more upset with whites after the incident. "He simply felt that he was better and superior to all white people" explained Morrison. When she was asked if she felt the same way that her father felt she responded "No, I don't feel quite the same way as he did. With very few exceptions, I feel that White people will betray me: that in the final analysis, they'll give me up."

The Bluest Eye novel

Published in 1970, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* tells the story of a black little girl who is destroyed by feelings of self-loathing and rejection from those around her.

Set in Toni Morrison's hometown of Lorain, Ohio, Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970. The novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl convinced of her own ugliness who desires nothing more than to have blue eyes. Through Pecola Breedlove, Morrison vividly unfolds African Americans' responses and reactions to the overpowering standards of beauty in Western culture: rejection, alienation, self-hatred, and inevitable destruction. The nine-year-old narrator in this novel, Claudia, points out in the beginning of the novel that fear of poverty and homelessness is a more prevalent day-to-day worry in her community than fear of discrimination, which she declaims "probably because it (discrimination) was abstract. But the concreteness of homelessness and poverty was another matter" (Morrison 11). However, the adult Claudia many years later comes to realize that "it is the land of the entire country that was hostile to marigolds that year" (Morrison 164); it is also the land, not mere poverty and homelessness that dominate the fate of Pecola. Racism affects people's lives in subtle yet profound ways by distorting common beauty and standards of happiness in *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison tries to show how cultural ideals based on skin color and physical features function as tools of racial oppression. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how society inflicts on its members an inappropriate standard of beauty and worth, a standard that mandates that to be loved one must meet the absolute "white" standard of blond hair and blue eyes. Morrison's narrator says that two of the most destructive ideas in history are the idea of romantic love (canceling both lust and caring) and the idea of an absolute, univocal standard of beauty. The novel, through flashbacks, explores the younger years of both of Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, and their struggles as African Americans in a largely White Anglo-Saxon Protestant community. Pauline now works as a servant for a wealthier white family. One day in the novel's present time, while Pecola is doing dishes, drunk Cholly rapes her. His motives are largely confusing, seemingly a combination of both love and hate. After raping her a second time, he flees, leaving her pregnant.

Claudia and Frieda, are the only two in the community that hope for Pecola's child to survive in the coming months. Consequently, they give up the money they had been saving to buy a bicycle, instead planting marigold seeds with the superstitious belief that if the flowers bloom, Pecola's baby will survive. The marigolds never bloom, and Pecola's child, who is born prematurely, dies. In the aftermath, a dialogue is presented between two sides of Pecola's own deluded imagination, in which she indicates conflicting feelings about her rape by her father. In this internal conversation, Pecola speaks as though her wish for blue eyes has been granted, and believes that the changed behavior of those around her is due to her new eyes, rather than the news of her rape or her increasingly strange behaviour. (Ryson, 2012: 103). Claudia, as narrator a final time, describes the recent phenomenon of Pecola's insanity and suggests that Cholly (who has since died) may have shown Pecola the only love he could by raping her. Claudia laments on her belief that the whole community, herself included, have used Pecola as a scapegoat to make themselves feel prettier and happier.

Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* was a step to be a writer but the novel was criticized for portraying the ugly truth of the black life in its raw form. The novel has a unique place in Morrison's life as "it comes out of a spiritual loneliness when she was a divorced, single mother, (...) and was trying to establish herself in the work world with a little support system." (Holloway 31) *The Bluest Eye* shows that the stereotypical image of race as superior and inferior leads to total destruction not only of a particular generation but of the whole nation. The story moves in and around a teen black girl Pecola who is a victim of race and sex both in the comfort zone of her home and community which is believed to be the safest place for a girl. She gets biased attitude both from the whites and blacks, the Geraldine. Because of her father's sexist outlook, she goes through an irrational state of mind and falls prey to her own ignorance. This book after many years got its credit and recognition as "*The Bluest Eye* is excerpted in *The Norton*

Anthology of Literature by Women." (Giroux 292) In 2000, the book was selected for Oprah's Book Club and remains as a magnificent piece of work.

THE CONCEPT OF IDEAL BEAUTY IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

The Ideal beauty in *The Bluest Eye*

Beauty standard is always built upon socially fabricated values. Claudia's perplexity concerning the representation of beauty refers to that politics. This also is associated with Freud's idea of the unconscious treatment of words as real things (Freud 147). This is why Claudia tries to transform symbolic representation of the doll's beauty into the real and cannot accept it as a form of external representation. When it comes to cinema, according to Jean Louis Beaudry, we see a similar transformation of the symbolic codes into real properties. Such representations are often incorrectly recognized as perceptions in the postmodern consumer community (315). The ideal of unattainable physical beauty is reinforced by the sugary, unattainable world of the family depicted in the school readers—of Mother and Father and Dick and Jane and their middle-class, suburban existence. The contrast between that false standard of life and the reality lived by the children makes them ashamed of their reality, of the physical intimacy of families in which the children have seen their fathers naked.

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

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

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

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

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

To recognize the significance of Toni Morrison's writing for the African- American community and its women, Darlene Clark Hine writes in *Black Women in America encyclopedia*: "In her works, [Toni Morrison] strips away the idols of whiteness and of Blackness that have prevented Blacks in the United States from knowing themselves and gives them their own true, mythical, remembered words to live by".

According to the color of one's skin, people are split up into two categories of beautiful and ugly. This novel shows that this is the only standard by which the Western culture evaluates its people.

The quest for an ideal beauty has devastating effect on Pauline, Pecola's mother. Pauline's life is already spoiled in her eyes when as a child she steps on a nail and her foot is left deformed. After she marries Cholly, their life in Lorain, Ohio, does not turn out to be the fairy tale she expected, so she alleviates her loneliness by going to the movies. Pauline is an example of a character whose ideal of beauty rests with a distorted image of whiteness, which in her case is seen through the movie screen. There, she is introduced, as the novel states, to the ideas of physical beauty and romantic love, and those ideas were "probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion" (p.122). Pauline indulges in the fantasy world she views in the theatres, even going so far as to wear her hair like the popular white actress Jean Harlow. The silver screen and those who perform on it define much of what is considered beautiful in America. "The movies are the primary vehicle for transmitting these images for public consumption."⁹ Those characters symbolize beauty and happiness as well as cleanliness to escape her shortcomings. In the light of colorist ideas, black people form the most disadvantaged segment of society. They have to countervail the prejudiced misunderstanding of the inaccessibility of education with vulgarity, of their poverty with filthiness. Pauline chooses to ignore that beautiful color imagery that is a part of her own experiences:

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

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

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

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

Pauline later on finds a job working for a white family, the Fishers, so that she can have the "beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" absent from her own family. Pauline cannot find these attributes in her daily life, and she both envies the family she cares for and admires them at the same time. This family signifies for her the life she longs to lead, and the white beauty she could never obtain. In her employers' household, "Mrs. Breedlove's skin glowed like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets and brilliant copperware" (p. 107). She is surrounded by beauty and feels as if she is a part of it. She wants this order rather than the chaos and uncontrolled environment her home life provides, even as she wanted order and perfection in her childhood. Pauline's need for order is evident because "[w]hatever portable plurality she found, she organized into neat lines, according to their size, shape, or gradations of color" (p.111). She seems to reject the fact that the Western tradition of beauty and perfection leaves her at almost the lowest level of this ordering. She takes orders from them and is honored by what she sees as their justification of her existence, even though it is not justification of her person, but her role as their servant.

She loves the little girl of the Fishers more than she loves her own children because this child is beautiful. For example, when Pecola knocks a hot pie off the counter at the Fisher's home, Pauline slaps and verbally abuses her because she disrupts her clean, white world; on the other hand, she comforts the weeping Fisher girl who is startled by the incident "yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger abused Pecola directly ..." (p. 109). This rejection of Pecola's pain is only emphasized as Pauline soothes the white child's fears, "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (p. 109).

The intimacy of this scene only restates Pauline's role in Pecola's destruction. She sees her mother giving the love and attention that should be hers to a girl that fits the picture of ideal beauty, something she can never achieve. Whereas this girl and her family call Pauline "Polly" affectionately, Pecola calls her Mrs. Breedlove because there is no personal relationship between mother and child.

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

The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us."(p.205)

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

CONCLUSION:

The beauty of a woman is not in a facial mode, but the true beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. No matter what color your eyes, hair, or skin, are you will always look beautiful if you are nice to people. It is not always physical beauty that makes a person beautiful, it is the heart that matters the most. Whatever your race is, accept and love yourself, because loving yourself is the greatest revolution.

The Bluest Eye represents the theme of whiteness as a standard of beauty throughout the entire novel.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison presents an interesting way but it is attractive. The writing style of Morrison becomes one of the strengths of the novel. Her use of different point of view makes the readers not feel bored to read the whole novel. In addition, the way Morrison puts the *Dick and Jane* in the opening of the novel story, which is extremely in contrast with Pecola's life, makes the readers feel the pain of Pecola in the novel. However, there are some weaknesses found in the novel. First, the language that is used by Toni Morrison in the novel is black slang terms so it is hard to be understood by the readers.

Second, Toni Morrison's criticism through the novel *The Bluest Eye* can cause misunderstanding for the readers who are not critical. It can be an invitation to be a white beauty that will make them imitate the white beauty concept which means having blue eyes, white skin, and blonde hair.

Finally, with many strengths and weaknesses, *The Bluest Eye* is a recommended novel especially for those who like shades of racism or colonialism of beauty standards. Toni Morrison successfully makes the readers feel the pain felt by main character. The story gives us message to accept and love ourselves, as no one is going to love you if you do not love yourselves first.

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