



THE “BLUEST EYE“ BY TONY MORRISON AS A VIEW OF REAL AND VIVID
SOCIAL LIFE

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Abstract: *This article is based on analyzing the plot, characters and main themes of the novel “The Bluest Eye” by Tony Morrison. The aim of this article is disclosing the social reality and show real culprits of the situation in this novel.*

Key words: *Dysfunctional families, domestic violence, personal disorder, extraordinary behavior, tense experience, destroyed childhood, symbolic decapitation.*

“The Bluest Eye “is Tony Morrison’s first novel, it is published in 1970. It narrates the tragic story of Pecola Breedlove, who develops an inferiority complex due to her eye color and skin appearance and she is a young black girl growing up in Morrison’s hometown of Lorain, Ohio, after the Great Depression. Due to its unflinching portrayal of incest, prostitution, domestic violence, child molestation, and racism, there have been numerous attempts to ban the book from libraries and schools across the United States. Decades after its publication, it is still a hot topic.

Morrison commented on her motivations to write the novel, saying, “I felt compelled to write this mostly because in the 1960s, black male authors published powerful, aggressive, revolutionary fiction or nonfiction, and they had positive racially uplifting rhetoric with them that were stimulating and I thought they would skip over something and thought no one would remember that it wasn’t always beautiful, how hurtful racism is. I wrote “The Bluest Eye “ because someone would actually be apologetic about the fact that their skin was so dark and how when I was a kid, we called each other names but we didn’t think it was serious, that you could take it in, so the book was about taking it in, before we all decide that we are all beautiful, and have always been beautiful; I wanted to speak on the behalf of those who didn’t catch that right away. I was deeply concerned about the feelings of being ugly.” Morrison decided to write a novel about how internalized racism affects young black girls in a range of ways-some petty and minute, some tragic and overwhelming.

“The Bluest Eye” is split into an untitled prelude and four large units, each named after a season. The four larger units begin with “Autumn” and end in “Summer,” with each unit being split into smaller sections. The first section of each season is narrated by Claudia MacTeer, a woman whose memories frame the events of the novel. At the time that the main events of the plot take place; Claudia is a nine-year-old girl. This device allows Morrison to employ a reflective adult narrator without losing the innocent perspective of a child.

In Lorain, Ohio, 9-year-old Claudia MacTeer and her 10-year-old sister Frieda live with their parents, who take two other people into their home: Mr. Henry, a tenant, and Pecola Breedlove, a temporary foster child whose house was burned down by her wildly

unstable father, Cholly: a man widely gossiped about in the community. Pecola and the MacTeer girls share childhood adventures, and what Claudia remembers in particular is the startling onset of Pecola's puberty when the eleven-year-old girl unexpectedly has her first menstrual period. Pecola is a quiet, passive young girl with a hard life, whose parents are constantly fighting, both verbally and physically. Pecola is continually reminded of what an "ugly" girl she is, fueling her desire to be white with blue eyes. Most chapters' titles are extracts from the Dick and Jane paragraph in the novel's prologue, presenting a white family that may be contrasted with Pecola's.

Claudia's narrative returns with Winter. She remembers the arrival of Maureen Peal, a new girl in school, whom Claudia calls "the disrupter." Despite Maureen's protruding dog-tooth and the fact that she was born with an extra finger on each hand (removed at birth), Maureen seems to embody everything perfect; she has long, beautiful hair, light skin, green eyes, and bright, clean, pretty clothes. She is enchanting and popular with both the black and white children.

Pecola is not popular. On the playground, Frieda rescues her from a vicious group of boys who are harassing her. Maureen moves quickly and stands beside Pecola, and the boys leave. Maureen then links arms with Pecola and buys her some ice cream. The world seems wonderful until Maureen begins to talk about Pecola's father's nakedness. Claudia and Frieda quarrel with her, and during the squabble, Claudia swings at Maureen but hits Pecola instead. Maureen runs across the street and screams back at the three girls:

"... I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly . . ." Deeply hurt, Pecola curls her shoulders forward in misery. (P-71).

These lines disclose the reality of that period, where black people were considered "ugly" and unpleasant, moreover they were not accepted as human beings.

The omniscient narrator now describes Geraldine, her son Junior, and her much-loved blue-eyed black cat. Neglected by his aloof and status-conscious mother, Junior wickedly lures an unsuspecting Pecola into his house under the pretense of showing her some kittens. Once inside, Junior hurls his mother's big black cat in her face. Scratched and terrified, Pecola moves toward the door, but Junior blocks her way. The black cat rubbing against her shortly distracts her. The blue eyes in the cat's black face mesmerize her.

Claudia's narrative resumes with Spring, and she tells us about painful whippings and about her father beating Mr. Henry for touching Frieda's tiny breasts.

The omniscient narrator then tells us about Pauline Breedlove's early life, her marriage to Cholly, the births of Pecola and Sammy, and her job as a servant for a well-to-do white family. Moreover, the narrator tells about Pecola's family. She describes the house where the Breedloves lived (before Cholly burned it down), and she points out the antagonistic relationship between Pecola's parents. We see Pecola and her brother, Sammy, bracing themselves for the ordeal of listening to their mother quarreling violently with their drunken father, Cholly. Each night Pecola fervently prays for blue eyes, sky-blue eyes, thinking that if she looked different -pretty, perhaps everything would be better. Maybe everything would be beautiful. 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's story is followed by a recounting of Cholly's traumatic childhood and adolescence. Abandoned by his mother and father, Cholly is raised by a beloved great aunt, Jimmy, who dies when Cholly is a teenager. During Cholly's first sexual experience, he and the girl, Darlene, are discovered by two white men, who mock and humiliate them. Afterward, the pain of humiliation, coupled with the fear that Darlene might be pregnant, prompt Cholly to leave town and head toward Macon, where he hopes to locate his father, Samson Fuller. He finds a belligerent wreck of a man who wants nothing to do with his son. Cholly eventually shakes off the crushing encounter. One day while he is in Kentucky, he meets Pauline Williams, marries her, and fathers two children, Sammy and Pecola.

Years later, on a Saturday afternoon in spring, Cholly staggers home. In a drunken, confused state of love and lust, he rapes eleven-year-old Pecola and leaves her dazed and motionless on the kitchen floor. After raping her a second time, he flees, leaving her pregnant.

The omniscient narrator continues, introducing the character of Eli hue Micah Whitcomb, a self-proclaimed psychic and faith healer known as Soaphead Church. He is visited by what he calls a pitifully unattractive black girl of about twelve or so, with a protruding potbelly, who asks him for blue eyes. He tricks her into poisoning a sickly old dog, proclaiming the dog's sudden death as a sign from God that her wish will be granted.

Claudia's narrative returns with Summer, and she tells us that she and Frieda learned from gossip that Pecola was pregnant by her father. She remembers the mix of emotions she felt for Pecola - shame, embarrassment, and finally sorrow.

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.

Alone and pregnant, Pecola talks to her only companion - a hallucination. She can no longer go to school, so she wraps herself in a cloak of madness that comforts her into believing that everyone is jealous of her miraculous, new blue eyes.

In this final section, Claudia says that she remembers seeing Pecola after the baby was born prematurely and died. Pecola's brother, Sammy, left town, and Cholly died in a workhouse. Pauline is still doing housework for white folks, and she and Pecola live in a little brown house on the edge of town.

Theme Analysis.

It is clear that, the family is one of the main units of the society, by reading the novel; you may face some problems described in the families, mainly contrasting the black family and the white family. The novel opens with a passage from a 1940s reader in which the ideal, white family is depicted:

"...The family lives in a green and white house and consists of a mother, a father, a son and a daughter, and a pet dog and cat. They are all happy, the children are playful and they have money..." (P-15).

In this novel, as you have read above, white family members reflect all goodness, whereas black family members present evil and bad things. Reduced to unpunctuated lines



and fragments, this passage is repeated many times as a heading for various sections in the novel. The effect is to contrast the idealized white family with the reality of several black families, especially Pecola's. Even the fate of the pets is contrasted, since in the black families, pets seem to meet a cruel fate:

"...witness the cat killed by Junior and the dog cruelly poisoned by Soaphead Church..." (P-53).

The novel shows the way white beauty can easily be degrading to young black girls and women. The novel is ironic due to the seasons and showing an opposite expectation of them. Spring is seen as a time of rebirth, but in Pecola's case, her own father rapes her in a drunken state and insanity. In addition, Claudia associates spring as being whipped for the first time with a switch, rather than a strap. In the summer, the presence of gleeful children is not seen, but instead an isolated, insane Pecola with an imaginary friend who she believes is jealous of her. In autumn, the season of harvesting, unfortunately Pecola's baby dies. In addition, *The Bluest Eye* depicts on how family life and childhood can have a great effect on a person's life. For instance, Cholly Breedlove was abandoned by his father, leaving him knowing how to nurture and care for his own family. He also raped his own daughter, adding to the family's downfall. Therefore, Pecola's tough family life leaves her not knowing how to react to the realities of American beauty.

The theme of beauty plays a great part in the development of the characters and the novel. Throughout the novel, the reader views Pecola worshipping the beautiful white icons of the 1940's. She long to be white and to have blue-eyed she does the following:

Pecola also goes as far as drinking three quarts of milk just so she can use the cup with Shirley Temple's picture on it; Claudia narrates this line:

"... We knew she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face. My mother knew that Frieda and I hated milk and assumed Pecola drank it out of greediness..." (P-47).

In addition, she always buys *The Mary Jane*, for whom the candy is named in order to see the picture of white, blue-eyed little Mary Jane on candy.

"To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane."(P-65)

We can see that whiteness becomes the icon of the beauty in this society, even black children used to think whiteness as a beauty.

The writer herself also mentioned about this:

"... *The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. In addition, twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that. Who told her? Who made her feel that it was better to be a freak than what she was? ... "(P-12)

Even in stores, shops and magazines the dolls are sold which have blue eyes, white face and blonde hair. Such dolls are loved and appreciated more than black children by white people and even black people. They do not treat black children well as they do such dolls. This also influenced greatly to young blacks' psychology and mind. According to this news,

“During the 1940s and ‘50s, the husband and wife team Kenneth and Mamie Clark conducted a series of psychological experiments examining young black children’s relationship to race. The study had several parts, but the “Doll Test” is most remembered today: The Clarks gave very young children otherwise identical brown and white dolls. The children were asked to say which doll was “nice,” and which was “bad.” An overwhelming majority of the black children identified the white doll positively and the brown doll negatively. The results of the study were cited in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision as an indication of the psychological damage done to black children by school segregation.” From this news, we can easily notice how “Bluest eye” conveys a real and factual situation.

Blue eyes symbolize the cultural beauty of America and white society. Pecola believes that having blue eyes will change the way others view her and giving her, something viewed as beautiful to society. She thinks that having blue eyes will also change the way she views the world, giving her a carefree world of a white child.

“... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they would say, “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We must not do bad things in front of those pretty eyes. “Pretty eyes. Blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something...” (P-67)

From this example, we can easily notice that bad condition of the family is one of the ill wicked influences for Pecola which makes her to lose interest for the life.

The color blue can also be viewed as a color of sadness. Even though Pecola strived to have blue eyes, the reader could see her as having the saddest eyes of anyone in the novel.

Morrison shows how the pressures created by white-defined values as reflected in American popular culture and in America as a whole pervert the relationships within African American families as well as among individuals in the black community. In a 1978 interview, Morrison explained that:

“... Cholly might love Pecola in the worst of all possible ways because he cannot do this and he cannot do that. He cannot do it normally, healthily, and so on. Therefore, it might end up in the rape...” (P-11).

Geraldine shows more affection for her cat than for her son, because the cat has blue-eyed, and no one loves Pecola’s black baby. Pecola’s mother more loves the white baby whom she takes care than her own daughter. The three neighborhood prostitutes use sex to profit from and to humiliate men. Soaphead Church, after being rejected by his wife years before, desires people’s things more than relationships with actual adults. Because he sees children, especially girls, as clean, pure, and safe, they are the only ones with whom he will relate. From Pecola’s wish and from many other events in the novel, it becomes clear that most of the people in Lorrain’s black community consider whiteness as beauty and blackness as ugliness. The novel has many characters who long to look white, and also has several characters of mixed ancestry who emulate whites and try to suppress all things in themselves that might be African. Soaphead Church’s Anglophile family and Geraldine are examples of this kind of black person.

In this society, everybody totally believes that white people are superior to black people and the whites even achieve domination. They do not treat the blacks as human



being. Pecola always comes across such difficulty, when she enters to the store to buy candies; the white seller has not even felt her. When he hardly looked at her, he does not want to service her.

“... Pecola unfolds her fist, showing the three pennies. He scoots three Mary Janes toward her—three yellow rectangles in each packet. She holds the money toward him. He hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand...” (P-64)

In such moment, Pecola felt herself as dandelions. Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. However, they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks,

“... They are ugly. They are weeds...”

Even in school, she is distasted:

“... Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk. The first letter of her last name forced her to sit in the front of the room always. However, what about Marie Apollinaire? Marie was in front of her, but she shared a desk with Luke Angelino. Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called on her only...” (P-60).

In this society, even teachers ignore blacks and do not want to speak to them in the class. This attitude influence to the black pupils especially to Pecola. This condition feeds up her coming to school. Exactly for this reason, Blacks do not find their place and role in this society, as they are disgusted, distasted, and ignored by all types of Whites. Therefore, they began to emulate to the whites by hating their own blackness.

In the novel, many blacks emulate the white Anglo value system by hating their natural blackness and their black culture. The outcome of these characters' behaviors is always bad. This can be seen, for example, in the descriptions of the educated black people who move into Lorain. They speak like whites, straighten their hair, and hide their blackness or “funkiness,” which is defined as a kind of natural unruliness, “the funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions”. Geraldine, for example, feels affection for her blue-eyed cat but not for her son whom she rejects. When he was a baby, she did not even let him cry. He used to long to play rough with the black boys but he was not permitted to do so. As he grew up, he agreed with his mother that he was better than the black boys were. When he could not stand his boredom anymore, he would bully younger children or girls. The repression of natural love and emotion results in him becoming hateful and destructive, as is shown in the incident when he kills the family cat. If he could not be loved, he would not let the cat receive any love or affection either. Then when his mother came home, he blamed this killing on Pecola, and she believed him because Pecola appeared so black.

The same self-rejection can be seen in the life of Pauline Breedlove, who not only internalizes a view of herself as ugly and worthless, but also rejects her own daughter, Pecola. The clearest example of this is when Pauline comforts the little white daughter of her employers but denies her own daughter affection or comfort. Then when Pecola



becomes mentally unbalanced, her mother will not even speak to her. In all of these scenes, where blacks reject their own racial identity, the result is either self-loathing or hatred.

In a community and a culture where the adults are not acting as caretakers for their children, children must take responsibility for each other. For instance: Claudia and Frieda look after Pecola when she lives with them. They continue to feel responsible for her after she has been raped and impregnated by her father. In doing so, they shoulder a burden that should be carried by the entire community. They give up hope of buying a bicycle and instead, in an attempt to save Pecola's unborn baby, plant the marigold seeds they have been selling to earn money. Their offering, their prayers, and their magic song may be childish, but the girls make a sacrifice of their own comfort and privilege, something that no one else in their community is willing to do for Pecola. From this example we can see how the relationships between parents and children in the black household and relationship between community and black people. In the black family, the children are given just orders by the adults. They are taught to obey even when they do not know what is going on. The grown-ups do not pay attention to the children do not give their kind at all:

"... Adults do not talk to us—they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information. When we trip and fall down, they glance at us; if we cut or bruise ourselves, they ask us are we crazy. When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick? We cannot answer them..." (P-25).

When Mr. Henry comes to live with the MacTeers, he acknowledges the presence of the children and plays with them. This is significant to the children; they feel special because he sees them, because he gives them his attention. However, later the reader learns that Mr. Henry has sexual interests in Frieda. The children learn the cost of being seen can be sexual exploitation. The grown-ups experience discrimination but they turn it in on themselves; and they reject themselves and each other as a result, instead of blaming the actual perpetrator, the white culture. Somehow, they are unable to see or experience their actual powerlessness. Instead, they blame themselves and each other. Perhaps this is the intention of the writer, who wants to portray the blacks in a childlike relationship to white culture. Because they have no real power, they cannot see. However, the narrator, Claudia, as an adult, can see the truth. She is, in the end, the only one who can really see. In telling Pecola's story, she helps everyone to understand Claudia and Frieda, are very strong. They are strong because they learned how to live from their mother. They do not accept the white notions of beauty, and they are aware of the unfairness and harsh conditions of their everyday life.

The changing seasons in *The Bluest Eye* extend the met abhor of Pecola's coming of age and passage through puberty. Her entrance into womanhood is met by an incestuous rape, unwanted pregnancy, and social rejection. In the afterward to the book, Toni Morrison says, "In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous, all the while trying hard to avoid the complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to. "As you see, every bad situation comes from society's ignorance toward the black people.