

## Too Good to be White: A Journey to Lose Identity in Tony Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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### Abstract

The history of African-American is a record of struggle for the right of existence and acknowledgement. An integral part of that struggle is the enforcement of the values and standards of the dominant ideals of white culture that made it impossible for African-Americans to hold on their identity. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison focuses on the difficulties, facing women, in obtaining identity and self esteem in a society dominated by white ethnocentrism. This paper aims at displaying the hardships and challenges of Black female characters in a world dominated by a complicated system of race, class and sex oppression which is seen as a threat to black women and their survival.

**Keywords:** African-American Literature, cultural ideals, identity, internalized racism, white ethnocentrism.

### Introduction

In the foreword to the 1999 Vintage edition of *The Bluest Eye*, Tony Morrison recollects a conversation she had with a former classmate at an elementary school who was genuinely yearning for blue eyes. Her classmate's wish for physical transformation troubles Morrison, she states, "Implicit in her desire [for blue eyes] was racial self-loathing. And 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? Who had looked at her and found her so wanting, so small a weight on the beauty scale?" Morrison's search to answer these questions is behind the writing of *The Bluest Eye* which shows that African American women, young and old, are motivated by self-loathing, leading to their loss of identity. Pauline and Pecola Breedlove exemplify the injustice exercised on the blacks by whites' ethnocentrism.

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*The Bluest Eye* is Morrison's first novel published in 1970. In the novel, Morrison attempts to depict what it is to grow up black and female in America in the 1930s and 1940s. Also central to Morrison's novel is the question of beauty standards and how the dominant culture uses the concept of beauty to dominate over disenfranchised groups. In other words, the novel is not only about a black girl who is being continuously rejected in her community for her ugliness, but also it is about a girl who internalizes this rejection and accepts it "as legitimate, as self-evident" (Morrison vii).

### **Purpose of the Study**

A number of critics have argued that *The Bluest Eye* addresses the issue of identity crisis in relation with beauty scale. Aoi Mori, for example, states that Toni Morrison presents "the detrimental effects of the way white culture prevents African-American girls from developing their own Identity" (30). Mori continues by suggesting that dominant societies exploit the media to "keep the oppressed immobilized and to eliminate any attempt by any individual in the marginal groups to retrieve their identity and autonomy" (35). Actually, the majority of the black female characters in the novel are absorbed and marginalized by the "cultural icons portraying beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspaper, window signs, dolls and drinking cups" (Gibson 20). Philip Page, furthermore, attributes the identity crisis not only to the media, but also to the city life following the immigration of black people to the north: "In the South, Cholly and Pauline both have stable identities with connections to an African-American community, connections that they lose in the North" (51). The argument in this paper focuses on two points: first of all, Pauline and Pecola's self-loathing is established as a result of the standards imposed on them by a group that they are not even allowed to be part of. Their ugliness, reinforced by what they are told, what they see, and what they read, cannot be dismissed because others will keep reminding them of it. Second, Although Pauline and Pecola are being taunted by a culture that (persists on ostracizing them) they are not allowed to be part of, they do not attempt to resist it. Instead, they surrender to the ideals of that culture until they finally lose their identity.

### **Discussion**

The novel is set during the Great Depression in a steel-mill town in the 1940s. In those days, many migrated in search of jobs and the characters of the novel came to Lorain, Ohio, for better living. The events are not presented chronologically; instead, they are linked by fragmented narrative voices: Claudia MacTeer the little girl, Claudia MacTeer the adult, and an omniscient narrator. The latter narrates the stories of the Breedlove family and the community around them. There is also Pauline's first-person narration and, by the end, a dialogue or

a monologue of Pecola and her imaginary friend after the latter descends into madness. These fragmented voices weave the events that shape Pecola's life and require a careful reading to put together the pieces of the story depending on the different perspectives presented.

Pauline's loss of identity is caused by ignoring her reality and living in a world that exists only in her fantasies. Although her story is not the focus of the novel, it is important to discuss first because it explains the background of both characters' loss of identity. Pauline's obsession with the white culture standards of beauty does not start from an early age as she was raised in Alabama and has spent her teenage years in Kentucky where she was surrounded by her family, listened to African American songs, and was happily accepting her community and culture. Pauline's dilemma begins with her disfigured foot which makes notice physical differences between people. Although she faces many obstacles throughout her life, she always blames her lack of fulfilment on the foot because "[t]he easiest thing to do would be to build a case of her foot" (Morrison 108). Cholly Breedlove is the first to recognize her and her foot as beautiful: "Instead of ignoring her infirmity, pretending it was not there, he made it seem like something special and endearing" (Morrison 114). At the beginning of their relationship, the couple are happy and in love. Everything dramatically changes as Pauline and Cholly move to Ohio. There, Pauline has problems in adapting and she misses her earlier life back in the south. In her words, Pauline expresses that "[n]orthern colored folks was different too [...] No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count" (Morrison 115). Actually, black women will make fun of how she does not straighten her hair and of the way she talks. Therefore, Pauline, starts buying new clothes and changing the way she talks while fights rage between the married couple over money.

At that point, her marriage is not a happy one anymore since Cholly is now spending his money on alcohol. To escape her frustration, Pauline starts watching movies in the theatre where she feels accepted,

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I'd go early, before the show started. They'd cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures [...] Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard and looking at Cholly hard. I' member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I'd seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. (Morrison 121)

In the theatre, Pauline is mesmerized by the glamour and fantasies of the ideal white world manufactured in movies; she gradually becomes dissatisfied

with her black culture and her role as a domestic mother and a wife. Yolanda Webb argues that “the media teaches black people to hate themselves and as a result they start to deal with internalized oppression. Internalized oppression is often released on other blacks instead of the oppressors and part of the oppressors is the media” (134).

Thus when Pauline compares her life to pampered white and black women in the north, and when comparing Cholly to men who are able to provide for their families, she experiences self-hate and feels disconsolate. Later in the novel, Pauline decides to re-invent herself through incarnating the media images she has been addicted to watching for a long time now. This could be achieved at the Fishers, the white family whom she works at:

She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all her needs [...] Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house [...] More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the after thoughts one has just before sleep. (Morrison 125)

Escaping blackness and associating with white dominant culture through playing the role of the ‘model servant’ for an ideal white family satisfies Pauline and enables her to get some level of self-respect. She takes orders from the family and is honored by what she sees as their validation in her existence, although in reality it is not validation of her person, but her role as their servant.

One day, while waiting for Pauline to get the laundry at the Fisher’s house, Pecola, accompanied by the MacTeers girls, accidentally knocks off a pan of her mother’s blueberry cobbler. The mother becomes more concerned with the floor and the little blue eyed white girl although Pecola is the one who has been burned by the falling cobbler. Instead of attending her injured daughter, Pauline runs to comfort the horrified little white girl promising to make a new pie for her:

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove pulled her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Freida and me by implication. “Crazy fool ... my floor, mess ... look what you ... work ... get on out ... now that ... crazy ...my floor, my floor ... my floor.” Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we back away in dread. The little girl in pink started to cry. Mrs. Breedlove turned to her. “Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don’t cry no more. Polly will change it.” (Morrison 86-87)

Morrison, in this section, objectifies the white supremacy that Pauline coddles and pampers while hitting and slapping her own flesh and blood. Morrison, very clearly, depicts Pauline's craving for white standards and rejecting her role as a mother and a housewife. Winnie Tamm notes that "black women contend with racism in regard to the dominant culture and sexism with regard to both the dominant culture and their own Black culture" (156). Black women struggle against oppression but they might end up being a victim of the cultural dominance in an attempt to define and reconstruct their individuality. Patricia Hill Collins, on the other hand, identifies "ideological domination" as one of the dimensions that structure Black women's oppression. She states that one of the dilemmas that hinder some Black women from resisting ideological domination is when "Black women developed public masks of conformity to the dominant White culture" and defined their inner-selves accordingly (qtd in Tamm 156). This is clearly depicted in Pauline who surrenders to the cultural dominance. Consequently, the tragedy does not lie in Pauline's character, but in the racist, white culture she has internalized. This same culture has affirmed ideal white standards and white looks, and has rejected and degraded anything opposite to it, anything black. The ideal standards she embraces can only be accepted and acted upon as she rejects and negates herself and her black culture.

Instead of trying to help her daughter break out of the tradition of blindly accepting white hegemonic ideals and colorism among black community, Pauline becomes a role model for Pecola. Before Pecola's birth, Pauline would talk to Pecola in the womb and begins establishing bonds as expected of a mother. Yet, Pauline dismisses Pecola as she sees her because she is ugly. In her voice, Pauline explains: "But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (Morrison 124). Pauline is the first to judge her daughter and label her as ugly. According to Nicole R. Fleetwood, "the dark-skinned black woman is often burdened with the dual role of being the most despised subject of colorism and its most vociferous enforcer" (89). Dark-skinned women suffer not only in the hegemonic culture but also in their own colored community. Pecola, a dark-skinned girl, is deprived of her mother's love and affection. Pauline, on the other hand, who experiences self-hatred fantasizes of having a mullatta child but instead she gives birth to a dark-skinned girl. Therefore, she cannot take her role as a loving and nurturing mother because of her internalized oppression on the one hand, and the ideological domination on the other. Instead Pauline will nurture "into her daughter [...] a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (Morrison 126). This explains Pecola's inner weakness and desire to dissolve into nothingness.

Pecola's self-perception is constructed by external forces. She surmises that the reason she is despised and ridiculed is that she is black. (actually, her skin is

a lot darker than most black people, which is the main reason that she is ridiculed). Doris Witt highlights a crucial crisis in the life of a dark skinned woman. She argues that “the excess of the dark black woman allows her to be both invisible and visible in both normative white culture and black communities” (qtd in Fleetwood 90). For dark-skinned women to be invisible in this trope is to isolate herself from both “normative” cultures and to fantasize about acquiring characteristics found in the hegemonic culture (blond-straightened hair, blue eyes, fair skin). But to be visible, this means a dark skinned woman will be subjected to neglect, despise, and exploitation in both cultures. In Pecola’s case, having a dark skin arouses in her the obsessive desire for blue eyes to be as beautiful and accepted as white people. This obsession might transfer her from being invisible to being accepted not only visible. The story begins with Claudia who gives a voice for Pecola. Throughout the novel, Pecola’s voice is never heard because, as Morrison explains, Pecola is subjected to a series of rejection starting from her indifferent mother and abusive father, to her classmates and teachers at school and other adults (Morrison viii). As a result, Pecola has no personality and no perspective to speak from. Towards the end of the novel, however, Pecola is raped by her father, loses the baby she was carrying, driven into madness, and she is finally conversing with an imaginary friend. At this point Pecola’s voice is heard. When she is reduced to madness, she has two voices, her own voice and that of her double (Suranyi 15). The lives of Claudia and her sister Frieda witness a dramatic change when Pecola comes to live with them. While Pecola’s presence is unexpected, the MacTeer girls bond with Pecola during her stay. Each night, Pecola eagerly prays for “blue eyes, sky-blue eyes” (Morrison 23), thinking that if she looked different – pretty – perhaps everything would be better. She does not want any shade of blue, but the bluest eye in order to overcome this battle of self-hatred. Morrison here exposes the influence of the myth of whiteness which produces an obsession in an eleven-year-old girl. This is clear in Pecola’s worship of the manufactured blue-eyed beauty symbol named Shirley Temple. Every night, Pecola would drink milk in the Shirley Temple cup praying for blue eyes. In this sense, Pecola becomes a victim of an alien but powerful culture that has forced its manufactured images.

Throughout the novel, Pecola encounters racism, not only from white people, but also from her own race. In their eyes she is too dark, and the darkness of her skin makes her ugly and inferior to every one. There are many incidents in the novel that lead Pecola into feelings of isolation and pain because of her physical appearance. For example, her encounter with Mr. Yacobowski, a white immigrant shopkeeper, makes her feel that for many people she does not really exist; that she is invisible:

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (Morrison 46-47)

Pecola here thinks that the 'vacuum' in the shopkeeper's eyes which she has seen often in white people is created by her blackness and ugliness.

In the face of her invisibility, she is deprived of a sense of worth and becomes nothing. Like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, her 'ugly' black skin hinders any acknowledgment of the child within. Actually, Yacobowski is very rude to her, and hesitates to touch Pecola's little hand to get the money she is paying for the candy. As she leaves the store, feeling ashamed, Pecola contemplates Mary Jane, a picture of a little blond girl with blue eyes on the wrapper of the candy. Rejected by the store owner, Pecola swallows the sweetness of candy with the mixed emotions of love, hate, pain, and anger. By eating Mary Jane candies, she identifies herself with Mary Jane and becomes Mary Jane in her fantasy: "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (Morrison 48). In Pecola's adolescent mind, attaching herself with objects that embodies the idea of beauty like the cup of Shirley Temple and the candy of Mary Jane would make her beautiful. As Singh comments Pecola's attachment with blue eyes "disturbs her ability to perceive and comprehend reality. It becomes an obsession with her and results in hallucination" (Singh 42). Morrison here exposes a social situation so distorted by the myth of whiteness that it produces in Pecola an obsession of the manufactured image of white.

While Pauline and Pecola are situated on the lowest level of the hierarchy of beauty, Geraldine and, the light-skinned, Maureen Peal rank high. They are not beautiful in terms of their physics but because they devote themselves to the art and manner of eliminating funkiness. The omniscient narrator gives an account of Geraldine that she is one of those girls who are interested in getting rid of "funkiness". In the same section of the novel, "Funkiness" is to involve in passion, nature and a wide range of emotions (Morrison 83). It can be seen when women laugh loudly, enunciate roundly, gesture generously, sway while walking, have thick lips and curly hair. As can be deduced, "Funkiness" is related to African American image and characteristics. Through presenting her example, Morrison presents the blacks' caste system among themselves. In other

words, Geraldine and Maureen Peel are “colored people” but they are extremely different from “niggers,” who according to Geraldine’s caste system, “were easily identifiable”. While “[c]olored people were neat and quite; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 85). She did her best so that her son would belong to the former group. Therefore, Louis Junior “wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber, In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen” (Morrison 85). These measures taken by Geraldine exposes her denial of her blackness and the blackness of her son. She tries to suppress the blackness of her son through cutting his hair and keeping his skin soft to fit into white society. The division that she establishes between “colored people” and “niggers” is her way to find a place in the white society and detach herself from her black culture which is not acceptable by white standards.

Pecola represents all that Geraldine despises and avoids at the same time. Invited by Louise Junior, Pecola finds herself at Geraldine’s house. Once inside, Louise Junior tortures Pecola by throwing a black cat in her face. The cat, instead, misses Pecola, hits the wall and lies dead. As Geraldine enters the house and sees Pecola, Louise Junior accuses Pecola of killing the cat. The mother of course sides with her own son and asks Pecola to leave the house and never comes back. Although Geraldine and her son intensify the tragedy of Pecola, but they, too, are victims of an ideology that permeates white culture standards. Morrison again exposes how African Americans are trapped in the vicious circle of suffering. Through the characters of the novel, Morrison clearly establishes that white aesthetic and white prejudice have manipulated the minds of blacks leading them to self-contempt because they can not meet the white standards. Instead of directing their frustration to the white culture that has continuously abused them, physically, mentally and psychologically, blacks have rejected themselves, their race and culture. In other words, the roots of the blacks’ self-hatred and contempt to each other are endorsed within white hegemony.

In addition, Maureen Peel is another female character in the novel contributing to the down-fall of Pecola. She is described as the “yellow dream gir with brown hair,” who is stylish and rich and enchanting “the entire school” including teachers and male/female students: “When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn’t trip her in the walls white boys didn’t stone; white girls didn’t suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners (Morrison 48). The fact that Maureen is whiter than other black children makes her superior as she attracts the the attention of her teaches and classmates. Her endorsement of white aesthetics gives her the right to classify Pecola as “ugly” and herself as “cute” since she has a light skin and could be mistaken for

a white girl. In one of Maureen's attacks, she says to Pecola "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute" (Morrison 71). In this encounter "Black" is identified with "Ugly" even within the African American community and Pecola is made aware that she is ugly because she is dark black. Such incidents reveal that Pecola is a victim of a racist and unjust society that has forced her to worship an alien culture and manufactured images, and to reject her self and identity. Moreover, Pecola is a victim of poverty and deprivation. Her family participates in her tragedy because they have not supported her. On the contrary, Pecola has inherited loss of self-worth from her parents. Therefore, Pecola becomes a catalyst of abuse and violence that both society and family inflicts upon.

While Pecola, her mother, Geraldine and Maureen Peal endorse the white cultural ideology of beauty, Claudia MacTeer, the leading narrator of the novel, rejects such an ideology that defines her as inferior. Through the character of Claudia, Morrison is representing a female African American who fights the dominant white beauty standards. Actually, Claudia questions black women's desire to have white culture qualities, like fair skin or blue eyes. On the contrary, Claudia feels "comfortable in her skin," and knows that "the thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 32). This "thing" is the constructed racism permeating every level of society in America and judging people on the basis of their skin colour. Thus this "thing" was also the dominant culture's standard of beauty that had nothing to do with "blackness".

Unlike Pecola, Claudia resists the manufactured images of white beauty and rejects the worship of blue-eyed dolls. She wonders why children seem to want them, and why adults think that blue-eyed dolls are the perfect gift. (Morrison 17-18). Claudia's only reason to have dolls is to dismember them in order to find the source of beauty or "to understand the rationale for standards that insist on white physical superiority" (Awkward 59). In doing so, Claudia is deconstructing the notion of Western beauty. Instead of having blue-eyed dolls, she longs to spend Christmas Eve at Big Mama's warm kitchen while listening to stories and African American music (Morrison 21). In her essay on *The Bluest Eye*, Cat Moses writes that 'African American oral traditions are [embodied] in the three whores' speech, song, and laughter, and in Claudia's aesthetic and her narrative voice' (624). Moses goes further and suggests that the connection to African culture contributes to the characterization of Claudia, provides her an authoritative voice, and assists her to gain independence of societies' values. Therefore, this connection to tradition through storytelling and music is vital to the survival of the MacTeer sisters (629). Moreover, the lack of connection to heritage is also one of the main reasons leading to the down-fall of Pecola.

## Conclusion

To conclude, throughout the novel, Morrison describes the hardships and challenges of Black female characters. Her novel explores a world dominated by a complicated system of race, class and sexual oppression which is seen as a threat to black women and their survival. Despite these challenges, in presenting the characters of Claudia and her sister Freida, Morrison provides an example of surviving black women who overcome the obstacles imposed by the superior blacks, whites and the society at large. Where on one hand the sisterly bond between Claudia and Freida empowers them to fight racial abuse, on the other hand Pecola's alienation from family and community results in her psychic fragmentation altogether. Unlike Pecola and Pauline, Claudia and Freida manage to preserve their original identities, not allowing the western ideals of beauty dictate their values. Pauline and Pecola both reject their blackness and with it their true identities. Pauline succeeds in finding her identity as a servant in a white family by blindly accepting western values, whereas Pecola goes insane because she demands a real change of her appearance as a proof of her beauty. However, in process, all the female characters lose something – Claudia and Freida lose their innocence. Even though they fight against the stereotype of white beauty, they experience disillusionment when they fail to save Pecola. Pauline loses her black self since she exchanges the life in the community she belongs to for the illusion of belonging to the white people's world. Pecola loses the most – her sanity.

## رحلة نحو فقد الهوية في رواية توني موريسون العين الأكثر زرقة

رشا مقابلة، كلية الآداب، جامعة جرش، جرش، الأردن.

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### ملخص

تاريخ الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي هو سجل للنضال من أجل حق الوجود والاعتراف. جزء لا يتجزأ من هذا الصراع هو مقاومة معايير الثقافة البيضاء المهيمنة التي جعلت من المستحيل على الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية التمسك بهويتهم. في "العين الأكثر زرقة"، تركز توني موريسون على الصعوبات التي تواجه النساء من أصول أفريقية في إثبات الهوية واحترام الذات في مجتمع تهيمن عليه الإثنية البيضاء. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى إظهار الصعوبات والتحديات التي تواجهها الشخصيات النسائية من أصول أفريقية في عالم يسيطر عليه نظام معقد من العرق والقمع الثقافي الجنسي الذي يعتبر تهديداً لهؤلاء النساء وبقائهن على قيد الحياة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الأدب الأمريكي الأفريقي، أزمة الهوية، هيمنة الإثنية البيضاء، العنصرية.

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