

The Bluest Eye:

A Story of Race, Beauty, Self-Image and Social Injustice

Toni Morrison, in her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*, creates a powerful portrayal of the effects of violence and discrimination on one of the most vulnerable members of American society—a young African American girl. Through her depiction of the eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, Morrison confronts issues of racism, poverty, sexual violence, and beauty ideals that are as relevant and powerful today as they were when the novel was written over forty years ago. Morrison's choice to tell Pecola's story from various points of view allows her to express the systemic nature of the oppression and adversity that each of her characters face, while juxtaposing the messy reality of their society with the picture perfect world of a children's book. In addition, the emphasis that Morrison places on the consuming nature of self-hatred, and her ability to humanize even her most destructive characters forces her audience to confront their own ideas of beauty and their role in perpetuating the damaging ideals at the root of most sources of oppression within the novel.

Pecola begins the novel as a delicate young girl with a desperate desire to be loved by the people around her. The combination of the lack of a loving and stable family and the fervent belief that she is ugly leads Pecola to think that if only she were beautiful, her situation

would be improved. The narrator captures this belief, saying "As long as she looked the way she did, as long as she was ugly, she would have to stay with these people" (Morrison 45). In order to transform the abstract idea of beauty into tangible goal, Pecola decides that she will focus her efforts on attaining blue eyes. The narrator again comments on Pecola's deeply held belief in the transformative power of physical beauty, stating "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 46).

This desire develops into an obsession as Pecola attempts to distance herself from her continually worsening reality. Her efforts to fulfill this need include reaching out to God—"Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes,"—and eventually seeking help from a man who claims to have supernatural abilities (Morrison 46). When these attempts end in ridicule and disappointment, Pecola retreats into her mind in a form of self-preservation and insanity, only then receiving her wish of blue eyes.

Pecola's fate in this novel is primarily the result of her cultural surroundings. Within her community there exists an underlying impression of self-hatred and a foundational belief that the physical characteristics shared by the African American community are ugly. These are infectious and highly destructive ideas that influence the lives of almost all of the characters surrounding Pecola, and contribute directly to her deterioration. In addition, Morrison makes it clear that the greatest problem in Pecola's life is the lack of love and support that she receives from her family. This is evident in the contrast between The Breedlove's and other black families in the novel, including the MacTeers, who manage to overcome a similar situation by loving and protecting one another. By learning the stories and backgrounds of Pecola's parents,

we understand that they are unable to love their daughter because they cannot love and accept themselves. The self-hatred that they, as well as many of the other characters who influence Pecola, have been taught throughout their lives builds, until the burden put on Pecola is too heavy for her fragile character to bear and she falls into madness.

Morrison's method of characterization allows her to develop multidimensional characters that function not as traditional protagonists or antagonists, but as members of a community forced to function under the weight of oppression. One technique that is central to this objective is the use of multiple perspectives, allowing us to sympathize not only with Pecola, as an innocent, overwhelmed, and neglected child, but with even the characters who have contributed to her pain. We learn the details of Cholly and Pauline's lives through their own eyes, giving us the ability to understand their pasts and the motivations behind many of their terrible actions. This allows Morrison to communicate the concept that Pecola's parents don't intentionally withhold love from her, but rather they are so broken by society that they are incapable of demonstrating positive and nurturing love. Claudia puts this concept into words in the last chapter of the novel, saying "Love is never any better than the lover. Wicked people love wickedly, violent people love violently, weak people love weakly, stupid people love stupidly, but the love of a free man is never safe. There is no gift for the beloved. The lover alone possesses his gift of love" (Morrison 206). This statement challenges the idea that love is inherently healing and redemptive, instead suggesting that love is only as good as the lover. This is why the broken human beings in this novel fail to love one another well.

In addition, Morrison's ability to humanize each of her characters by exploring the events that altered their own innocence in times of vulnerability makes her work convicting rather than simply expository. Her techniques of characterization establish the purpose of *The Bluest Eye* as an examination of society, much larger than the handful of characters it depicts. In telling Pecola's story, Morrison could easily have evoked sympathy for a young and broken girl, and demonized the adults in her life that contributed to her brokenness. However this method would have allowed her audience to escape from self-examination by pitying a single character and avoiding a larger problem. Instead, *The Bluest Eye* is carefully crafted so that casting blame on the perpetrators of even the most despicable acts is appealing, but ultimately not viable. Cholly Breedlove exemplifies this phenomena, as it would be reasonable to hate him for raping his daughter, yet even he becomes a sympathetic figure. He has undergone indisputable suffering, having faced abandonment and humiliation. He is capable of violence, but he is also vulnerable, as evidenced by the white men who force him to have sex for their amusement, and the embarrassment and disappointment resulting from his encounter with his father. Cholly represents an apparently unbreakable figure, hardened by the lifetime of abuse that the world has cast his way. Yet he becomes so hardened that he reaches for his daughter to remind himself that he is alive, in an act that Claudia suggests was not rooted in malice but in his own form of love. The novel concludes with the knowledge that Cholly loved Pecola, that he was perhaps the only one who loved her "enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (Morrison 206). This knowledge forces Morrison's audience to consider their own guilt in perpetuating the atmosphere of hatred that determined the fate of both Cholly and Pecola, rather than blaming Pecola's suffering on the callous nature of one individual.

Further exploration of the purpose of *The Bluest Eye* reveals a variety of racial and social implications. The self-loathing that overwhelms many of the characters in *The Bluest Eye* is largely the result of internalized white beauty standards that deform the mentalities of black girls and women within the novel. Implicit messages idealizing whiteness appear everywhere, including Claudia's white baby doll, Pecola's love of Shirley Temple, the emphasis on white beauty that Pauline sees in the movies, and the preference for light-skinned children evident in Maureen Peal and the girl in the white family for whom Pauline works. All of these influences lead the characters to value whiteness and traditionally white characteristics, namely blue eyes, and to shun their own physical traits. In Pecola this phenomena manifests itself in a fixation on blue eyes, which eventually becomes one of the central forces behind her insanity. The predominant factors which contribute to Pecola's fate are her need for love and support and her need to feel valued and beautiful. Both of these things are direct results of her surroundings. The absence of love in her life is a result of the self-hatred that she and her family have learned throughout their lives. Her desire for blue eyes stems from the cultural belief that white characteristics are beautiful and that their own, black characteristics are ugly. The effect that these elements of Pecola's surroundings have on her character ties directly into the purpose of the novel.

Morrison explains in the afterward that her focus through the novel is exploring how "something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (210). She accomplishes this objective through the creation of a character who experiences unusually extreme effects of racial adversity, magnified by a crippled and crippling family. Yet some

aspects of Pecola's vulnerability are present in all young girls, a point which Morrison emphasizes through her use of the Dick and Jane passages, both in the prologue and before each chapter. The use of a child's narrative and voice lets us know that the story is told by and about children, but the way that the author distorts the Dick and Jane story by removing the spaces and punctuation reveals that *The Bluest Eye* is very different from the world of Dick and Jane and picture perfect childhood. The Dick and Jane passages eventually focus on Jane, and even as we are told that the family is happy we see Jane as isolated. Her parents and even pets won't play with Jane, and it isn't until a friend comes along that she escapes loneliness. This is symbolic of the imaginary friend that Pecola fabricates at the end of the novel, after her transition into madness.

Through *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison makes a statement regarding the tremendous affect that racial based self-loathing can have on even the most pure and blameless members of society. It is a call for recognition of true beauty, something that is seldom noticed by the characters in the book, but which Claudia comments on while looking back at Pecola's outcome, saying "The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way . . . 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." All of the community's "waste," the product of its self-hatred, was dumped on Pecola, preventing her real beauty—as a girl, a child, and a human being—from ever showing. *The Bluest Eye* is a captivating story that exposes the subtle effects of racism and the weight that societal expectations place on a young and fragile girl. This story belongs uniquely to Pecola, yet its implications are relevant to anyone who has felt the weight of

vulnerability, injustice, and oppression. This universal aspect of Morrison's work convicts her audience to examine the validity of societal constructs, and moves them to evaluate their role in perpetuating the oppressive standards that could destroy something so beautiful.

Bibliography

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000. Print.