

## Self-hatred in *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is a powerful and thought provoking novel that deals with a sizeable number of themes including race, identify, beauty, and the devastating impact of societal norms on African American women's psyche in the image of Pecola Breedlove, a vulnerable eleven-year old black girl, living in Ohio in the early 1940s. In fact, in this literary work, which is her first novel, Toni Morrison sheds lights on the societal forces that oppress and traumatize black individuals in general, and particularly black women like Pecola Breedlove. Thus, this article aims at delving deep into the novel in an attempt to offer a thorough analysis of the extent to which the white beauty standards have devastated the lives of African Americans who have unfortunately internalized them due to huge social pressures.

**Keywords:** Racism – discrimination – self-contempt – oppression – poverty.

### RÉSUMÉ:

*The Bluest Eye* de Toni Morrison est un roman très poignant et stimulant qui traite d'un nombre considérable de thèmes dont la race, l'identification, la beauté et l'impact dévastateur des normes sociétales sur la psyché des femmes afro-américaines à l'image de Pecola Breedlove, une jeune fille noire de onze ans, très vulnérable, vivant à Ohio au début des années 1940. En fait, dans cette œuvre littéraire, qui est son premier roman, Toni Morrison met en lumière les forces sociétales qui oppriment et traumatisent les individus noirs en général, et en particulier les femmes noires comme Pecola Breedlove. Ainsi, cet article vise à plonger dans le roman pour tenter d'offrir une analyse approfondie des conséquences dévastatrices des normes de beauté des Blancs dans la vie des Afro-Américains, qui les ont malheureusement intériorisées en raison d'énormes pressions sociales.

**Mots-clés :** Racisme - discrimination - mépris de soi - oppression - pauvreté.

### INTRODUCTION

*The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison was written in the 1960s, a period considered by Morrison as a time of great social upheaval in the lives of black people. Toni Morrison was an American novelist, an essayist, and a professor who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1993. Morrison was known for her writing poetic style and exploration of African American identity and culture.

Before engaging on her writing career, Toni Morrison taught English in Houston and at Howard University. Her journey as a writer started after she had divorced her husband. She is the author of a huge number of literary works including *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1997), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012), *God Help The Child* 2015, and the most important of which is her masterpiece entitled *The Bluest Eye* which is under study in this article. In fact, the idea of writing *The Bluest Eye* emerged while she was teaching at Howard University. The author took her inspiration from the daily oppression and racism inflicted upon her and her family, which pushed them to move to Ohio.

Set in 1941 in Ohio, a working class town where racial tensions were extremely high, *The Bluest Eye* is the first novel of Morrison that deals with the story of African-American people who had often been subjugated to a silence both in history and literature. They have been victims of

racism, marginalization, and many more injustices that have led them to self-hatred because of the difficulties they had to fit in the white social standards of life. Just as almost all her novels, *The Bluest Eye* explores the shattered identity. Through the main character named Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl who is struggling to find her place in the world, Toni Morrison shows how blacks are constantly ridiculed and bullied because of the color of their skin. Pecola is a tragic character who is abused and neglected by her community and her parents, and her innocence is shattered by the harsh realities of the world around her.

Pecola Breedlove becomes friend with two other girls named Claudia and Freda who live in the neighborhood, and together they go through the challenges of growing up black and poor in a white dominated Society.

The central conflict of the book is the protagonist's overwhelming desire to get blue eyes, caused by the daily oppressions she is subjugated to, and the racist beauty standards of that time. the title of the book *The Bluest Eye* is significant because it represents Pecola's desire for something that she can never get.

The book deals with many themes such as racism, sexism, classism, and above all self-hatred which is under study in this article. It also deals with the ways in which these systems of oppression affect blacks in general, and black women in particular. In fact, in his *Hate Prejudice and Racism* (1993), Milton Kleg gives a clear definition of

self-hatred. For him: “Self-hatred refers to the condition where an individual attempt to blame his or her group for those problems encountered by acts of prejudice.” (WANG Xiao-yan, 2014, p.2) thus, Self-hatred can be seen as a result of a deep assimilation into the dominant culture and ideology, which leads to a complete denial of one’s own cultural heritage and racial roots.

In fact, *The Bluest Eye* puts the focus on the theme of abuse, marginalization through characters who experience feelings of self-hatred and uneasiness due to the color of their skin. Thus, it delves deep into the imposed white standards of beauty and the traumas it generates on the people who fail to fit in those standards.

However, dealing with such an interesting topic requires us first to delve deep into the historical context of Pecola’s self-hatred, secondly, probe into the toxic family environment in which she grew up before showing how her lack of love and affection led to her downfall.

### **I. The Historical Origin of Pecola's Racial Self-hatred:**

The novel takes place in Lorain, precisely in Ohio. It is set during the early 1940s which was a period marked by significant events in the American lives, and above all in the lives of African American people during a time of great social, economic and historical upheaval in America. The Story started in the autumn of 1940 and continues through the autumn of 1941. That was a time when the United States of America was recovering from the Great Depression which had lasted from 1929 to 1939. That was a time of economic struggle which was more felt by the African-American community, where unemployment rate was at its peak.

In addition, that time period saw the beginning of the US involvement in World War II which further exacerbated the hardships of Americans in general, and African-Americans in particular. This novel delves deep into the impacts that those events have had in the lives of African-Americans, and above all on black women in the image of the protagonist named Pecola Breedlove and her family. The hardships inflicted upon them stem from the combination of both historical and societal factors such as the prevailing racism and discrimination of that time, and above all the internalized white beauty standards.

In those days, blackness was equated to ugliness. The dominant white culture imposed its hegemony and dictated its beauty standards. Unfortunately, many black people accepted to internalize those white values, and as a result, developed a complex of inferiority and self-hatred, which turned them into victims of segregation, discrimination and racism.

This can be read through the entire Breedlove family described in the novel, who internalized a sense of ugliness and inferiority based on the color of their skins because of the messages they receive from the community and the popular culture according to which beauty is inextricably linked to whiteness. But it is important to note that their ugliness is considered by the narrator of the story as a creation of their own. The conviction they had of their

ugliness is in great part due to the white standards of beauty imposed on them. As an illustration, Pecola believes that she will become beautiful in the eyes of the community if she happens to have blue eyes just like the white women. Thus, she visits a spiritualist named Soaphead, who promised her that she can turn her eyes blue. Pecola trusts him because of her overwhelming desire to get blue eyes:

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. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes’. (...) Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. (MORRISON, 1994, p. 46).

The aforementioned quotation is the proof that Pecola has a strong belief that she will no longer look ugly once her most burning dream comes true. Pecola’s desperate yearning for blue eyes is the evidence that blue eyes are associated with white people in the community where they live. As a young black girl, trapped in a sad reality she is unable to escape from because of the color of her skin and her gender, Pecola finds another way to escape her ugly life. Thus, she starts fantasizing about and prays for pretty blue eyes on a day-to-day basis, like the eyes of the beautiful and happy white girls she sees in movies. She has a strong belief that if she possessed blue eyes, she would be different, beautiful, and as a result put an end to her long standing streak of self-contempt.

In addition to this, she deeply believes that having blue eyes would help put an end to her parents’ regular fighting, make her teachers and classmates appreciate her. Having blue eyes then becomes a means for her to get everything she lacks including acceptance, love, family, friends and you name it.

Thus, it becomes obvious that Pecola's self-hatred is a consequence of historical and societal forces that devalue Blackness and work in favor of the white standards which are considered as the ideal standards. Through Pecola's tragic story, Morrison castigates the destructive impact of racism and the internalized oppression on individuals and communities.

### **II. The family as the roots of Pecola’s racial self-hatred:**

In *The Bluest Eye*, the Breedlove family is a central factor in Pecola's tragic downfall, contributing to her internalized racism, self-hatred, and eventually her mental breakdown. The family's dysfunction, marked by poverty, abuse, and neglect, creates a toxic environment where the protagonist, Pecola internalizes societal messages of black inferiority and the unattainable ideal of white beauty.

In fact, all the Breedlove family, including Pecola herself, undergo the racism of the wider society, believing that their blackness makes them ugly and unwanted. This is illustrated through Pecola's yearning for blue eyes, which she believes is a symbol of white beauty as a way to escape her perceived ugliness and the day-to-day abuses she faces at school and in her own community.

Pecola's parents, Cholly and Pauline, are both pure products of the traumatic experiences inflicted upon them by the society they live in, and they, in return, perpetuate that cycle of abuse, violence and neglect at home. Cholly's alcoholism and rage for example along with Pauline's uncontrolled obsession with white beauty and the neglect of her own children, bring about a deeply unstable and emotionally damaging home environment. We can for example read how ashamed Pauline was when her daughter, Pecola was born:

I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. So when I seed it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You know who she is, but she don't look the same. They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the hardest child to feed. But Pecola look like know right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her you know how they make them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. Across between a puppy and a dying man. But I know she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair but Lord she was ugly. (Morrison, 1970, Pp. 99-100).

As shown above, Pecola was born in a family where she was undesired, and that sense of disgust instilled on her a self-hatred she grew up with. She is but a victim of parental abuse and neglect. Her parents, Cholly and Pauline inflict acts of cruelty upon her on a regular basis. The cruelest act she undergoes for instance is when she gets raped and impregnated by the one she was supposed to get protection from, her own father Cholly Breedlove. She bears his child, who dies shortly after birth. This inhumane act of the protagonist's father, has completely wiped out the confidence the little girl is expecting to get from her own family and from her community.

This shows that Pecola's life is marked by hardship, poverty, and family dysfunction. Her parents Cholly and Pauline are deeply flawed individuals who themselves have been scarred by the oppressive burden of racism.

In addition, as shown above, the Breedlove family are very often ridiculed and marginalized by the society they live in, and this reinforces their negative self-image. Those acts of racism they are made to undergo on a regular basis in their community are what explain the toxic family environment in which Pecola has grown up. For instance, the day-to-day fights in which the couple engage further exacerbate the already complex situation they live in. The daily tensions at the family level are in fact, what prevent

the eleven-year old girl, Pecola, from leading a peaceful and blossoming life. As an illustration, we can read how her father beats her mother until she becomes almost unconscious:

Just once. She ran into the bedroom with a dishpan full of cold water and threw it in Cholly's face. He sat up, choking and spitting. Naked and ashen, he leaped from the bed, and with a flying tackle, grabbed his wife around the waist, and they hit the floor. Cholly picked her up and knocked her down with the back of his hand. She fell in a sitting position, her back supported by Sammy's bed frame. She had not let go of the dishpan, and began to hit at Cholly's thighs and groin with it. He put his foot in her chest, and she dropped the pan. Dropping to his knee, he struck her several times in the face, and she might have succumbed early had he not hit his hand against the metal bed frame when his wife ducked.

This act of cruelty pushes their son, Sammy, Pecola's younger brother to get compelled to side with his mother while his father punches her. In addition to this, Pecola's father has put the family outdoors and burned down the family house, which leads Pecola to be temporarily in county custody:

Mama had told us two days earlier that a "case" was coming—a girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited. We were to be nice to her and not fight. Mama didn't know "what got into people," but that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors. (Morrison, 1970, p. 17)

This shows that the Breedlove family is characterized by recurrent quarrels, fights, a lack of love and support, and a lack of ability to provide a safe environment for Pecola who becomes a subject of pity and disgrace. The breakdown of this family which was supposed to be a source of love and security, leaves Pecola feel isolated, vulnerable, and eventually, heartbroken. The entire family was terrorized by the threat of being outdoor: "*Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life. The threat of being outdoors surfaced frequently in those days. Every possibility of excess was curtailed with it.*" (Morrison, 1970, p. 17).

However, it is important to note that even though Cholly is one of the antagonists of the novel, the author has described his life and thoughts before he meets his wife Pauline in an attempt to show the reasons why he is so violent, abusive, and why he drinks heavily. In this sense, Toni Morrison reveals that Cholly was abandoned by both of his parents: "*When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad,*" (Morrison, 1970, p. 17)

and thus, given that he never benefited from a family support of any kind, it is normal for him not to have any clue whatsoever about how to become a good father: "*In those days, Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him.*" (Morrison, 1970, p. 119) By showing us the difficult past experience of the protagonist's father, Toni Morrison demonstrates how oppression, extreme poverty, and suffering are often passed down through generations, from grandparents to parents, and from parents to children.

### III. Pecola's Lack of love and affection as a root cause of her self-hatred:

The lack of love is also proven to play a significant role in Pecola's self-hatred. The most apparent one in the novel is the lack of parental love. For instance, Cholly's lack of emotional support further exacerbates Pecola's worthlessness. Moreover, Pauline's internalized racism, as well as her preference for white beauty standards represent a blind spot that keeps her from realizing how she fails to provide her daughter, Pecola with the emotional and unconditional love and support that she needs in order to feel happy.

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the lack of love and affection, particularly familial love, deeply impacts the characters, especially Pecola Breedlove, leading to devastating life-long consequences. The novel explores how deficient love and the desire for an idealized form of love can negatively affect one's sense of self and contribute to emotional and psychological damage. Pauline's preference for the young white girl she works for over her own daughter Pecola is the evidence of the internalized beauty standard which is inextricably linked to whiteness.

Obviously, Pecola Breedlove is the character who suffers the most from white beauty standards, for she strongly believes that being beautiful, is something that she can only attain by getting blue eyes like white women. In fact, Pecola has inherited her obsession with white beauty standards from her own family members, and above all from her mother, Pauline, and this has further deepened her self-hatred. This is the reason why she is the character who is cursed by almost all the characters of the novel just because of the color of her skin. At school for instance, Pecola feels lonely, very timid and frightened. Nobody plays with her because she is black, extremely poor and ugly. Unfortunately, all the black kids in the image of Pecola are educated to internalize the value that dictates the beauty standards.

As shown in the aforementioned lines, *The Bluest Eye* explores the profound and devastating consequences of a lack of love and affection, particularly familial love within a society polluted by racism, violence and extreme poverty. It also shows the extent to which the absence of love can lead to the pursuit of destructive ideals, and ultimately result in psychological trauma and breakdown. In his article entitled "Misconstruction Of Love And Lack Of Self-Esteem In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*", Professor

Mendy confirms that destructive power of violence and self-hatred triggered by poverty in the Breedlove family:

Their poverty has gradually destroyed their possible infatuation for one another, to end up with a family where parents fight every day, and fail to instill in their offspring mutual love and self-appreciation. It is usually assumed that when violence 'walks' through the door of a room, love 'jumps' out of the window. (Louis Mendy, 2014, p. 2)

Additionally, it is important to note that love is a precious thing that each and every single character in the novel constantly seeks. Pecola's mother, Pauline for example, constantly looks for the love provided to her by the white family she works for. She is filled with joy whenever she receives praises and satisfaction from that family. Pecola herself seeks love through her ironic dream of possessing a pair of blue eyes someday, a white American ideal of beauty. Being loved and praised is the most burning dream of the main character, Pecola Breedlove. That is the reason why she dreams of the iconic figures of actresses with the blue eyes she longs for.

Additionally, we can also see that Blacks' contempt in general, and Pecola's one in particular is deeply rooted in the actions they take every day without realizing it. For example, Pecola's parents as well as every black parent in the novel offer white dolls to their children as birthday presents, and this appears to be meaningful enough. The white doll is considered beautiful and attractive by both Blacks and Whites. It has blue eyes, and this expresses its beauty, which can be read through the protagonist's statement:

It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. I was bemused with the thing itself, and the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? (Morrison, 1970, p. 19)

The preference of white dolls as gift in the black community is once again confirmed through the following statement: "*Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it.*" (Morrison, 1970, p. 19) This shows once again the extent to which Blacks have internalized the white beauty standards.

### CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison skillfully and successfully deals with the harsh realities of racial prejudice and the overwhelming quest for validation in a society where the worth of Black lives is constantly at stake.

Through different characters of the novel, and above all through the protagonist named Pecola Breedlove, Toni Morrison manages to expose the societal evils nourished by racial bias that keep relegating the African American community, and above all African American women at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. Through the character of Pecola Breedlove, Toni Morrison shows how African American women are burdened by a society that deems their blackness ugly.

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