

# Pecola Breedlove: A Paradigm of Human Predicament and Emotional Suffocation

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## Abstract

Toni Morrison (1931-2019,) the first Black American woman writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature, has authored eleven novels in addition to several critical essays. Morrison's fiction beginning with *The Bluest Eye* (1970), has won such critical acclaim that the Nobel Prize was only an icing on the cake. She looks at configurations of blackness, assumptions of racial purity, and the ways in which literature employs skin colour to unravel a character or to inspire a narrative. This article presents a study of Morrison's first and perhaps the most widely-read novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in which the reader gets a heart-to-heart experience of the agonies of an eleven-year-old Black girl, Pecola, who is ignored by her mother, teased by her classmates and abused by her drunk father. The novel is not simply the story but the living, breathing image of Pecola who is totally clueless about the storm raging inside her, who thinks her life would be perfect if only she had the baby blue eyes and golden curls of the child movie star Shirley Temple. She comes to signify the novel's central themes and to illustrate how racism can distort and destroy the self.

**Keywords:** Pecola Breedlove, Mythetic, Black emo, Marginalization

Toni Morrison, an African-American author whose works have their origins in the tense interface between a number of cultures, a writer whose novels are anchored in an ever-growing social complexity, has as her central concern the multiplicity of African-American identities and experiences. Her ability to portray what it means to be Black in American society is her major achievement as a writer. She grew up in a culture where whiteness was the norm, where black identity was marginalized and the nuances of marginalization suggested a range of trauma associated with black experience. Morrison has been described as a romanticized exotic black artist figure. This 'larger than life' woman has a powerful way of fixing readers in her gaze and transfixing them with her writing. Writing to her is a compulsion — a talking deep within herself—an extraordinary way of thinking and feeling. One of her main concerns is to survive whole in a world where she and her people are, in some measure, victims of something and in no position to do anything about it. In fact she puts her characters in grotesque situations of great

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duress and agony. Writing provides her with a safe place in which she can think the unthinkable as she confronts the effects of shame and trauma on the lives of African Americans.

*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's first novel which is a lament for all starved and stunted people everywhere, is also a probe into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in America. And the beauty here is black. *The Bluest Eye*—a tragic story of child abuse, with race, gender and class mixed in—is concerned with racial self-loathing, the loss of identity, and shame. The author was worried that the slogan of racial pride 'Black as Beautiful' which entered into the popular discourse of the 1960s would not be able to dispel the long-standing psychic effects of prejudices rooted in racialism and sexism. The title *The Bluest Eye* is strange on account of superlative degree of color (the Bluest) as well as of the singular form of the noun (eye). The singular noun may refer to the damaging white gaze, to the saddest story of the disintegration of a child's identity (the "eye" as "I").

In *The Bluest Eye* the schoolmates Pecola Breedlove and Claudia and Frieda MacTeer process the ways in which their black population and the larger white one judge by shades of skin colour and economic status. Through their daily interactions the girls perceive that they are somehow lesser than others. The novel begins with the simplistic premise of the Dick-and-Jane elementary school primer that families are made up of a father, a mother and children living together happily in a well-kept home: "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 live in the green and white house. They are very happy" (3). The subsequent linguistic disintegration of the passage suggests that this reality does not exist for everyone in American culture: "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 live in the green and white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress he wants to play who will play with Jane (4).

*The Bluest Eye* unveils the heart-rending story of the Breedlove family and their neighbours in Lorain, Ohio. As the dark-skinned and the most impoverished family in this black community, the Breedloves serve as a scapegoat for the frustrations and pain that the greater white culture generates. Deemed ugly by her family and community, the eleven-year-old Pecola searches for love and acceptance but finds only scorn for her poverty and physical appearance. Rejected by parents, teachers, shopkeepers, and schoolmates, Pecola prays for the blue eyes that society sanctions. Ignored by her mother, Pauline, deserted by her brother, Sammy, raped and impregnated by her father, Cholly and abandoned by her friends Claudia and Frieda, Pecola finally undergoes a psychotic break that allows her to attain her imagined beauty.

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The novel is a portrait which depicts how a black girl's idea of what constitutes a true self is decentered by the ethnocentric tenets of the society into which she was born. Pecola fails to discover a true self precisely because she allows her values to be dictated by the white standards of beauty. She allows herself to be wooed by the dream of the bluest eye—a sure panacea for all her earthly woes. She is convinced that if only she had blue eyes like the painted, ever cheerful eyes of Shirley Temple that stare back at her each morning from her milk mug, then she too would be accepted into the world of green and white houses and families that are very happy. And this had been promised to her in the 'white text' wherein she first learned to read about the world. Shirley Temple, Dick and Jane, the blonde Christmas doll—these are embodiments of the white logos, the templates which society hold up for Pecola to judge herself against. These figures of white mythology to which she compares herself are the catalyst which triggers Pecola's psychic disintegration, leaving her alienated from any sense of an authentic black self.

Considering Pecola's pathetic circumstances, it is understandable perhaps that she be drawn to an idealized fabrication. The readers will certainly sympathize with Pecola when she is scolded by Mrs. McTeer for drinking three quarters of milk in one day. Claudia the narrator says that Pecola " ... took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley's face" (22). But her intense fondness for the cup also represents a denunciation of the whole of a value system that has stricken not only Pecola and her family, but the entire black community. The author is determined to affirm the existence of the fear, frustration and fury inherent in her black life. For that, Morrison chooses Pecola as her thematic representative to expose the psychic causes for the social distortions within the black community.

During the fight between her father Cholly Breedlove and mother Pauline, Pecola wishes God to make her "disappear" (39). But Pecola cannot escape her hellish home anymore than she can hide from a community that shuns her for her inherited ugliness. Yet she prays God each night, without fail—for blue eyes. She wonders why she is avoided: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness...that made her ignored and despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (39).

What is the nature of her "ugliness"? Its secret is curled up in a cultural construct for what constitutes beauty. The standard of beauty—the idealized version of the black self—is based on whiteness. Naturally, the Pecolas and Claudias of the world cannot help but feel ashamed. Shame is a reflection of feeling about the whole self in failure, as an inferior in comparison with others, as inadequate and defective. *The Bluest Eye*, as it highlights the politics of beauty standards and the construction of African-American female identities, shows how dark skin functions as a marker of shame, a sign of stigmatized racial identity. Like the deeply dark

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and equally ostracized Emma Lou in Wallace Henry Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Pecola is ignored and despised at school by teachers and classmates alike. When a girl wants to insult a boy she simply accuses him of "loving" Pecola, a taunt that provokes "peels of laughter from those in earshot" (45). Boys daily harass Pecola with an insulting verse Black e mo. "Black emo Black e mo. Ya daddy sleeps nekked". Then they dance a "macabre ballet" around Pecola whom they were prepared to "sacrifice to the flaming pit of their scorn" (15). Claudia's angry reaction to Maureen Peel reveals the force of interracial shaming within the African-American community. A high-yellow dream child, Maureen enchants everyone at the school. As Maureen pronounces judgment on Pecola, Claudia and Frieda that they are "black and ugly", Claudia and Frieda publicly shame Maureen by shouting "six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie" (74). But Pecola, feeling humiliated, folds into herself "like a pleated wing". Claudia recognizes that "the thing to fear" is what makes Maureen "beautiful" while denying beauty to Pecola, Claudia and Frieda (74). The Thing Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African-American community have internalized, a standard that favors the "high-yellow" Maureen Peel and denigrates the "black and ugly" Pecola Breedlove.

Pecola is victimized by the community's hierarchy of color and caste. It is based on the white model for beauty. Since it is colour that serves to determine class order, those who are able to ape white social codes may hope to move socially and economically in both the black and white worlds. Or as Claudia the narrator says, those "children who are most white are prized by parents and teachers alike" (61). Pecola is in triple jeopardy as she is black, ugly and female. Therefore she is excluded from sharing in whatever social or economic tidbits that may be offered.

The novel has four chapters—Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. As the novel shifts from "Autumn" to "Winter", the chapters are depicting the cold, sterile undercurrents within the community—attempting to re-establish some refined social order. But their basis for continuity emulates a white bourgeois social model that, for Morrison, denies all "passions" and "human emotions" in black life (68). The narrator recalls the urban black women's adaptive development with sarcastic description. "They go to land grant-colleagues, normal schools, and learn how to do the white men's work with refinement" (68). This passage accentuates the emotional void which has been precipitated by the tremendous influence of the white social model. Morrison, in order to drive home her position, brings in the living picture of Geraldine, her husband, Louis and her son, Louis Junior. She tells her son that they are "colored people"; and she explains to him the difference between "colored people" and "niggers" (11). Colored people are "neat and quiet"; niggers are "dirty and loud" (71). In Geraldine we see the status quo personified; she embodies the communities strictly codified caste system.

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And it is into this “compound” that Pecola wanders. She represents all that Geraldine’s commodified value system abhors. Pecola is invited by his classmate Louis Jr into his house. But she is shabbily kicked out of the house by both Geraldine and Louis. In this scene Pecola embodies all that Geraldine despises and fears: “She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her”. (75) This emotionally wrenching scene will move the reader to fully sympathize with Pecola. Geraldine growls at her “Get out...you nasty little black witch. Get out of my house” (76). Pecola backed out and turned to find the front door. “She saw Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes...” (76). “She held her head down against the cold. She could not hold it low enough to avoid seeing the snowflakes falling and dying on the pavement” (76).

Like Geraldine, Pauline, Pecola’s mother, too, treats her as a pariah. She has her borrowed ideas about beauty which lead her inevitably to self-contempt. She has internalized white beauty standards conveyed in Hollywood films. At Pauline’s workplace, that is, the rich Fisher’s home, Pecola accidentally smashes a fresh-baked berry cobbler onto the kitchen floor and splatters the white child’s new pink dress, Pauline knocks Pecola to the floor. She slaps Pecola and abuses her “Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . .work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor” (87). Juxtaposed against the clean white home and the “pink and yellow girl” (87) Pauline’s own child reminds her of the shabby reality of her present life. Her destructive self-hatred prompts her to be destructive to her daughter.

Pecola’s father Cholly Breedlove’s life encompasses cycles of birth and rebirth of love and hate. He is an “ugly nigger”. He is “Dog Breedlove”. His last name is quite obviously ironic because love is not, nor has it ever been, what he breeds. His life is a compilation of abandonment self-contempt, circuitousness and despair. Like Pauline, Cholly Breedlove transfers his own chronic shame and stigmatized racial identity—his own feelings of humiliation and defeat—to his daughter. This bad nigger, like Guitar in *Song of Solomon* and Son in *Tar Baby*, lives in a chronic state of humiliated fury and vents his anger on “petty things and weak people” (38) including the members of his own family. In his one move toward what he perceives as a positive act, Cholly attempts to “save” his daughter and himself from their lives of pain and humiliation. That he chooses to “fuck her tenderly” is horrifically yet inexorably symptomatic of still another one of the novels characters whose life has been culturally mutilated (116). As he looks at the unconscious body of his daughter lying on the kitchen floor, Cholly feels “hatred

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mixed with tenderness. Pauline responds to the rape by beating Pecola, an act less brutal than Chollys. Pecola endures the traumatic physical and emotional rejection by her mother, as Pauline refuses to look at Pecola and does not believe her story.

In the last chapter of the novel Pecola is found turning to Soaphead, a “spiritualist and psychic Reader” (137) to grant her wish for blue eyes. When Pecola come to Soaphead, he clearly recognizes her requisite: “Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty” (137). He names and understands the “evil” incongruity, and so it is, for him, a “logical petition”: “Of all the wishes people had brought him—money, love, revenge—this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes” (137). White beauty, white living, white freedom—these are the things the characters in *The Bluest Eyelong* for, strive for, and yet can never realize.

Soaphead the fraud honestly wishes he could work miracles so much so that he vows to “annihilate” the “evil” by assuming his own god-like stance. To prove to the poor girl that she can indeed have blue eyes, Soaphead uses a dying, old dog as a catalyst for her conviction. She is made analogues with the defenseless animal as scapegoat. He tells Pecola to feed the dog his food (mixed with poison) and tells her that “if nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one” (138). The dog convulses and dies, and Pecola is left with her illusion of blue eyes. Imprisoned now behind her illusion of blue eyes, Pecola escapes into schizophrenia and silence. And Pecola ends up living permanently in the dissociated world of madness where she talks to her alter identity—her “friend”—about her magical blue eyes. Members of the community look away from the shamed outcast socially ostracizing her with their gaze avoidance. Only in her mad world is Pecola someone special, a black girl with the blue eyes of a white girl.

Members of the community, who make Pecola the target of shaming gossip, are “disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged or even excited by Pecola’s story” (190). Expressing their contempt, they remark that Pecola’s baby, which is “bound to be the ugliest thing walking”, would be better off in the ground” (189-90). Only her friends Claudia and Frieda “felt a need for someone to want the black baby live—just to counter at the universal love of white baby dolls, and Shirley Temples about Maureen Peals” (190). Yet even they fail her and thus “tried” to see her without looking at her and never, never went near” (204). Even though “his touch was fatal” Cholly “was the one who loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her” (206). While her father’s rape is shocking and traumatic, her mother’s rejection and the communities blame and desertion leave Pecola totally helpless. Pecola’s life has exhausted itself into the mythmatic act of the male robbing the female of her identity. She, like Ovid’s Philomela,

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has had her tongue cut out by an act which has inverted the natural order of life. “The damage done is total”, Claudia recalls (158). And thus, like Philomela who turns into a nightingale, Pecola tries to transform herself and transcends the mutilation of her life and she with her bent elbows and her hands on her shoulders flails her arms” like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly” (204).

When Pecola finally finds sanctuary in her psychotic state, she asks her other half, “suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough” (203). We see that even in the safety of her psychic split Pecola fears rejection despite her belief that she has blue eyes. Pecola’s rejection by all segments of her black community denotes its pervasive sense of inadequacy in the larger culture. And the baby, which is born premature, dies, and the permanently damaged Pecola is socially ostracized. “She was sad to see. Grown people looked away; children...laughed outright (204). And Claudia, ends up avoiding Pecola, who spends her days “walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear” (204).

Pecola, who absorbs the “waste” others dump on her, finally becomes the community scapegoat as members of the black community project onto her their own self-loathing and self-contempt—their own stain of blackness. “All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness...We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength” (205). However, Pecola’s sacrificial position in the novel also has a more hopeful purpose. Claudia has survived to tell her and Pecola’s story; she has vouched for the unnaturalness of black life. As a consequence she perceives in retrospect that she and the community have failed Pecola. For Pecola, as Claudia says, “...it’s much muchmuch too late” (160).

Morrison’s purpose for writing *The Bluest Eye*, as she recalls, “was to write a book about a kind of person that was never in literature anywhere, never taken seriously by anybody—all those peripheral little girls” (Neustadt 88). As she tells the story of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, a carefully shaped narrative, the devastation caused by black self-contempt—the sense of self as racially stained and defective as “dirty” and “nasty” and “ugly” to use descriptions that recur in the text. In *The Bluest Eye*, a novel contains layers of woundedness, idealization and aggression, Morrison exercises the power of fascination by exposing the racial wounds and shame-humiliations suffered by Afro-American’s in the race-conscious American society.

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