

A Traumatized Girl: Pecola's Struggle in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Wen-hsiang Su, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor
Shih Chien University Kaohsiung Campus
Taiwan
whsu@g2.usc.edu.tw

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Abstract

In her first novel, published in 1970, Toni Morrison used *The Bluest Eye* to depict an African-American girl, Pecola, who was yearning for a pair of blue eyes, a symbol of beauty. Morrison raised the issue of racial discrimination dominated by a white society, and she made Pecola become the victim alienated by both her own people and society at large. With an inferiority complex, Pecola, constantly regarded as ugly, experienced an extremely different childhood compared with others of her age. From being despised by her classmates to being abandoned by her own mother, and even to being raped by her own father, Pecola suffered psychological and physical deprivation in a world where most of the people adapted a white moral standard. This paper will discuss how these incidents turn Pecola into an individual reflecting the sickness of and calling for revolt against an unjust world.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, African-American, racial discrimination, inferiority complex

Different from other writers, Toni Morrison adopted a fairy tale-like passage repeated three times in different formats as a way to demonstrate the white dominance over black people at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye*.

The first format deploys perfect structures and punctuation, through which Morrison symbolizes a harmonious family where every member seemed carefree and enjoyed a happy life. This short passage about a happy family corresponds to a white American family, organized, and idealized. The perspective presented in this passage represents a dramatic contrast to the lives of a section of the black people whose life can never meet the standard, which is far from attainable, as the passage indicates.

The second format, using the same description but run-on structures and no punctuation, symbolizes the MacTeer family whose life, though failing to compete with the white family, at least, represents an attainable way of living. Morrison chose not to use any punctuation in order to “show[s] some disorder in a world that could be orderly” as well as to criticize the ignorance of society about black families (Ogunyemi 113). Better than most black families, the MacTeers, a family of four, still maintain the capacity to provide the basic necessities for the family members, and they even reach out their hands to care for Pecola.

However, the third format, using again the same content as the first one, contains no punctuation, no structures, and no word divisions. It portrays a stereotypically underprivileged family, the Breedloves, who suffer violence, abuse, and incest. Morrison used such a narrative to convey the idea of the void that many black families face in life. In forms two and three, the missing structures and punctuation represent an incomplete society where some people lack basic needs.

According to Morrison, these three passages divided the society into three classes, the wealthy white, the orderly black and the dysfunctional black families. This places the wealthy white at the top of the pyramid.

Female figures have been undermined by a masculine discourse for so long that women become silent in the face of masculine dominance. In a world mainly controlled by a patriarchal hegemony, female discourse is always excluded. Women are deprived of the right to articulate their own ideology. Ideology is manipulated to limit thoughts and regulate social rules. Ironically, men dominate in the game of power struggle, while women become victims who gradually lose their own identity. The disappearance of the female discourse can be viewed as a sign of the success of the patriarchal force that transcends all of the heterogeneous voices. In order to form a unitary regime, patriarchy can only manifest its idiosyncrasy by identifying itself with the law. Michel Foucault argued that “[t]o deal with sex, power employs nothing more than a law of prohibition . . . Power constrains sex only through a taboo that plays on the alternative between two nonexistences” (84). Foucault implied that the mechanism of male dominance is based on the juridical discourse that aims to regulate norms to stop the generation of the truth. In other words, the patriarchy intends to cover up the facts through the exclusion of the alternatives. Foucault further explained that Western monarchies share some common traits in terms of dominance as “they were constructed as systems of law, and they expressed themselves through theories of law, and they made their mechanism of power in the form of law” (87). Thus, it is not hard to see that patriarchy considers women a threat that transgresses its juridical notion of power.

The formation of power originally intended to look for the production of truth so as to create a symmetric and juridical system of law. However, a normalizing society where men and

women share the same value becomes a myth. The reason is that “the law is what constituted both desire and the lack on which it is predicted” (Foucault 81). Men and women can never achieve a balance in reference to this power struggle. On the way to acquiring power, desire is generated and begins to exert violence and create menace. Judith Butler argues that “desire is manufactured and forbidden as a ritual symbolic gesture whereby the juridical model exercises and consolidates its own power” (96). This explains that hegemonic power manifests itself by imposing an artificial unity where its desire is justified through the repression of that of women. Eventually, women are considered the unconstrainable and undesigned. This means the disappearance of female identity in a univocal society guarded by male hegemony. The disappearance of the female voice also indicates that “women can never be understood on the model of a ‘subject’ within the conventional representational systems of Western culture” (Butler 25). Butler implies that a female figure ontologically denotes an absence in contrast to the signified “be” of a male role. The masculine denial of women to be the unrepresentable absence helps manifest masculine identity. Therefore, in the world dominated by pure male hegemony, women are “the relation of difference, the excluded, by which that domain marks itself off” (Butler 25). In other words, women are considered not only the Other, as Beauvoir mentioned, but also the signification of lack. Women’s identity disappears and women are deprived of the privilege to speak “I.” Without the meaning of being, women only become the masculine mainstay to strengthen the Symbolic of law.

In a society mainly constructed on the idea of conventional regulations interpreted based on the perspective of masculinity, female subjectivity and individuality suffer an excruciating displacement to reflect masculine identity. Power generated from desire can no longer ensure the production of truth; instead, power, always understood in reference to phallogocentrism, oppresses other heterogeneous voices through a series of alienations and exclusions. Women, then, are subjected to a set of social conventions to fulfill the duty to become women. The status of women can never be juxtaposed with that of men. Monique Witting argues that “[g]ender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general” (64). Witting indicates the absolute power claimed by the masculine that maneuvers the generation of ideology in a binary relation. This power confines the possibility of proliferation of meanings as well as the hermeneutic narrative of self-assertion. Simone de Beauvoir claims that “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (301). She implies that women cannot choose what they want to be. Women, in fact, are the incarnation of male fetish and fantasy that ground the manifestation of female discourse. As a result, women cannot but comply with a set of social regulations enforced by univocal phallogocentrism. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is trapped in an intricate web in which she fails to claim her own sovereign self. Overwhelmed by the framework of white beauty, Pecola follows the male fetish and fantasy, which only leads her to end up identifying herself with a void.

Claudia, as the narrator, pointed out that the propaganda of white beauty was both widespread and deeply rooted in society, and she accused the white racial allies because “they issue orders without providing information” (10). In other words, what Claudia intended to say is that the white racial discourse deployed its own ideology in society to make other people follow obediently. In this regard, it is not hard to find that the white hegemony dominated mainstream society, and, furthermore, it used its “white cinematic icons [to] shape the self-image of the novel’s black community in general” (Bishop 252). This is a factor which influenced greatly the self-image of the Breedlove family, who succumbed to the white from every aspect, and finally resulted in its own destruction. For instance, Claudia detested the white doll that her parents gave her as a birthday gift and, in fact, she was completely aware of the white ideology imposed upon black people. Her refusal of the white doll also implies her unwillingness to yield to the white ideology. However, even if she hated the doll, Claudia knew that black people, like her own parents, had no choice but to follow the discipline set up for them by white society. Black people’s assimilation into a white ideology suggests that “being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weakness and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment” (17). The society exploits the right of black people to freely enjoy the meaning of true freedom. To a certain degree, *The Bluest Eye* depicts “in poignant terms the tragic condition of blacks in a racist America” as well as emphasizing the consequence of the destructive elements which lead black people into a state of physical and psychological poverty (Ogunyemi 112). Black people, in other words, could never earn any essential dignity within a white dominated world.

In terms of aesthetics, the white hegemony has its own interpretation, so it standardizes the meaning of beauty, a meaning which only applies to those with white skin, blond hair and blue eyes. The propaganda of beauty penetrates the life of every person, especially black people, who are the total opposite of the white in respect of physical features. The constant presence of this arbitrary standard of beauty, such as white people’s images on cups, candy, and movies, prevents any liberation from this ideology. Therefore, black people must follow the collective ideology of beauty presented and projected by mainstream society. One such example happened in the MacTeer family when one of the daughters showed her admiration for a white icon on a cup. Morrison described that:

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. (19)

Both Frieda and Pecola fell for the image of a white girl. They considered Shirley Temple an incarnation of sublimity. As for Pecola particularly, she could not even remove her eyes from

the girl, whom she believed she could never become. This explains why Pecola admired the girl, rather than drinking the milk right away. The normalization of beauty is adopted by the white hegemony for purposes of ideological control. In other words, it implants “white standards of beauty . . . on blacks with attendant psychological repercussions” (Ogunyme 113). Beauty is no longer objective aesthetics but turns into a defect haunting black people for life. Furthermore, after receiving the doll, Claudia showed her repulsion of it by claiming that “[a]dults, 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” (20). This demonstrates that she could not agree with the idea of beauty accepted by most people because she was aware that the white hegemony created the myth as a means to dominate black people, and she refused to be a victim accepting a false image of beauty.

Another aspect of the white ideology is the manner in which it arouses agitation and hatred in black people. The white hegemony classifies society into many layers of stratification; that is to say, it sets itself on the top of the society, authorizing its power to undermine black people as well as to cause division among black people themselves. Morrison mentioned that “[w]hite kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (87). The mother, a black woman, forbade her boy to play with niggers as she believed that they were marked and could never win any recognition in society. This short passage shows that society is formed on the basis of stratification, where, even for black people themselves, people are forced into one specific category. At the bottom of society lie the underprivileged black people, the niggers, a term used to describe the lowest of the low. With the manipulation of social stratification, the white ideology successfully constructs a society that only favors non-blacks. Black people eventually feel inferior to whites, and some black people cannot even be free of discrimination from their own kind. The Breedloves, for example, become the victims of this white ideology. The Breedloves assume themselves to be ugly for “[t]hey lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly” (38). Therefore, they are ultimately affected by the white beauty and accept the fact that their skin color makes them subject to whites. Not only does the white ideology have a great influence on the Breedloves, but also “the Breedloves are suffering primarily because they believe they are ugly” (Baum 99). The white beauty fallacy gradually affects Pecola’s cognitive development.

Pecola, of course, is a victim influenced by mainstream social culture. Born into a family with constant confrontation between her parents, Pecola starts to question her being in this world. Once witnessing the confrontation between her parents, she realized her family could never be like the ideal constructed by the white hegemony. Feeling frustrated, Pecola prayed to God to let her disappear: “‘Please God,’ she whispered into the palm of her hand. ‘Please make me disappear’” (45). Praying becomes a way for black people to look for spiritual consolation. Because of being

silenced, they can only talk to God to look for salvation. They believe that God will listen to their prayers and bring them peace. However, ironically, they do not acknowledge that the God to whom they pray is the incarnation of a white figure. Black people are educated to believe that “God was a nice old white man, with long white hair, flowing white beard, and little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad” (134). According to this description of God, His physical figures outperform His ontological significance. The repetition of “white” is used to sanctify the righteousness of acquired power. God with blue eyes symbolizes not only a man with empathy but also an iconic figure of white people. Here, in the version of a white God, no matter how hard the MacTeer sisters pray for their flower to grow, or how desperately Pecola desires a pair of blue eyes, they would never have their wishes granted. The white hegemony, in fact, builds a wall to separate the black people from the world it has constructed. The ideology used to alienate black people manifests a heterodox narrative that undermines and denies black people’s identity. In other words, black people would never enjoy a harmonious and happy life, and their journey through life has come to a stop. No doubt, Pecola inevitably walks on a path leading to her being discriminated against and raped.

Pecola, the main protagonist in the novel, searching for the blue eyes, does not receive any love from either her family or the society. She grows up in a family where her parents quarrel all the time and show violence as well. Besides, because of her ugly appearance and her family’s infamous reputation, no schoolmates or people, except the MacTeer sisters, would like to befriend her. Thus, it not only deprives Pecola of her confidence but also makes her believe that only if she has blue eyes will she be noticed or seen. Because of the disruption within her family, Pecola has to stay with the MacTeer family. Claudia said that “[t]he country 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” (16). Claudia’s short statement prefigures Pecola’s disastrous life. She understands that Pecola’s miserable life comes from the lack of love in her family. Even though her own mother sometimes loses patience with her, Claudia knows her mother loves her, and she has a happy family compared with Pecola’s. Although both born into black families, Claudia and Pecola have completely different destinies. After Pecola has her period for the first time, the issue of being loved is elevated. Pecola does not get help from her own mother to deal with her first period but rather from the hand of her friends’ mother. This proves that she is a child without a mother’s care or love. Having her period not only means Pecola has the ability to reproduce but also indicates that she needs someone to love her to have babies. Thus, when answering Claudia about the meaning of having her period, Frieda simply answered “somebody has to love you.” (32). Feeling panic and abandoned, Pecola can only rely on having blue eyes to claim her own identity and seek attention from other people to love her.

The ideology of white beauty constructed by the white hegemony greatly influences not only values of society at that time but also coloreds biologically different from the whites. Pecola’s

desire to search for blue eyes to become beautiful is the consequence of the widespread discourse of white beauty. The society consisting of merchandise praising beautiful white girls results in an unorthodox interpretation of beauty to the public. Ogunyemi argued that “she has been undermined psychologically by playing with toys suitable for white children and being made to admire white movie stars with white standards of beauty” (114). Like most black people, Pecola has immersed herself in the discourse of beautiful girls. Feeling alienated and abandoned, Pecola blames herself for not being a white girl. She thought that if she were the girl on the cup, she would be popular and her family would be as happy as others. Her appearance turns into a defect intentionally created and imposed by the authorial dominance to undermine the existence of Others.

Given that being white is the representation of beauty, Pecola’s determination to have blue eyes becomes stronger. Pecola has been considered ugly as well as bullied by her classmates because of her looks. Owing to the ignorance of society, Pecola gradually loses her confidence, which also leads to the disappearance of her identity. Morrison pointed out that “[l]ong 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” (45). Her pain and trauma all come from inhumane interactions around her. The society builds a wall to exclude her from entering it. She found no power to fight back after she was assigned to sit alone. Pecola’s “teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (45-6). In other words, an arbitrary line has been drawn to distinguish beauty and ugliness, white and black. Her existence as a human being is completely denied, especially when the candy store owner, Yacobowski, refused to have any physical contact with her and pretended that “he does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see” (48.) Looking at herself in a mirror, Pecola acknowledged that her imperfection was innate, and becoming beautiful was her priority so that she could be seen. Therefore, she turned to God’s help. She thought that if only she prayed hard to God, she could be granted a pair of blue eyes. Her yearning for the blue eyes finally drives her crazy and “her conviction that she has been given them by Soaphead church indicates a complete psychic disintegration” (Vickroy 100). As a victim of an unorthodox beauty standard, Pecola undergoes a drastic mental transformation. The blue eyes no longer signify the incarnation of beauty but represent a myth that punishes people who believe in it.

Representing a traumatized child alienated by her family and the society, Pecola leads a life manipulated by white superiority. The white superiority “provide[s] not merely poignant metaphors but also concrete examples of the neglect, exploitation, disempowerment and disavowal of certain communities and even the entire culture” (Vickroy 92). Pecola is forced to believe that she is ugly, and only through possessing blue eyes can she avoid other people’s contempt. Pecola, therefore, wondered “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” (46). Thus, she

hopes that someday she can become as beautiful as the American beauty icon, and this explains why “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” (23). Using the cup to drink milk not only shows Pecola’s frequency of exposure to the little white girl, but also denotes her wish to become a white girl by drinking milk. She believed the more she drank the milk the sooner she would become pretty. In this regard, Morrison depicts a black girl psychologically influenced by the hegemonic discourse, which undermines black women’s belief in their beauty. Morrison, then, tended to disclose a society with “attitudes and images based on the myth of white superiority that reinforces her tendency toward self-hatred” (Alexander 394). Obviously, the white superiority constructs a world full of discrimination and degradation, which exploits the identity of black people. Vickroy also argued “how the traumatic experience of social powerlessness and devalued racial identity prevents the African American community from joining together” (92-93). The disappearance of identity, of course, results in a confusion of self-assertion. This explains Pecola’s proclamation with the search for blue eyes.

Pecola is completely possessed by the myth of blue eyes as a symbol of beauty. Even though she eats candy and drinks milk from the cup, none of them help her get the blue eyes. Having blue eyes ontologically seemed impossible to her, so she sought the priest’s, Soaphead’s, help. She told the priest that she “can’t go to school no more,” and she wants to have blue eyes so that her classmates would look at her as an individual (174). Pecola believed that, as a messenger of God, Soaphead might have the power to help her. Looking for spiritual comfort forces Pecola to become “critical of insubstantial and superficial image[s] that lead to the creation of false selves” (Vickroy 100). The beauty image is mainly created by the white hegemony which controls most of the coloreds. Such an image is constructed on the basis of false interpretation of sublimity. Sadly, Pecola steps into this trap and gets stuck in it forever. Not only does she fail to acquire blue eyes, but she also makes herself more miserable and vulnerable. Pecola releases her oppressed ego to challenge the organized social order. Her schizophrenic personality at the end of the story symbolizes the consequence of exposure to the influence of white superiority. In one of her schizophrenic conversations, both of the “speakers” confirm the confidence after getting the blue eyes:

Yes, they sure are prejudiced.
 Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they’re prejudiced.
 That’s right.
 They are bluer, aren’t they?
 Oh, yes. Much bluer. (197)

In this short talk, Pecola, after visiting the priest, conjures her inner self to prove she has blue eyes. Her inner ego helps to justify her belief in her beauty. On the one hand, she gains confidence and finally speaks for herself, none of which can be seen before she goes to ask for the

priest's help. However, her newfound identity is still constructed on the basis of a false ideology of beauty. This false discourse on beauty, in fact, leads Pecola to insanity. Family desertion and incestuous abuse result in Pecola's alienation from her own people and her true identity.

Influenced by the false discourse of white superiority, Pecola undergoes both physical and psychological violence from her family. In her family, she is despised by her mother, Pauline. Pauline is a housemaid taking care of a white family. When she was young, she wished to become Jean Harlow, a blonde, blue-eyed star from the cinema of the 1920s. Her love for Jean Harlow presented her with a way to disconnect from her blackness in favor of an idealized white identity. Eventually, working for a white family allowed Pauline to temporarily escape her underprivileged life. Gradually, Pauline generated a certain degree of hatred toward her own family and had "internalized the pervasive standards of whiteness" as a part of herself (Vickroy 93). In other words, she believed that working as help for a white family raised her social status compared with her role in a black family and her identity as a black woman in society. Thus, she paid more attention to the white child in order to achieve her sense of identity within a white dominated world. Then, Pauline "stopped trying to keep her own house . . . More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man— they are like the afterthoughts one has just for sleep" (127). By blaming Pecola for scaring the child, she indicated her own sense of alienation from other black people. Pauline completely internalized the whiteness as her excuse to stay away from her tattered family. In this regard, Pecola failed to enjoy the love that other children have when they are growing up. Because of the disappearance of love, Pecola tended to believe in the consequences of her ugly face.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* depicts a black girl who suffers discrimination not only from society at that time but also from her own people. From being bullied by her school classmates to being alienated and raped by her own family members, Pecola represents a victim traumatized by a false beauty image in a white world. Pauline abandons her in favor of the white girl, and her father rapes her because he fails to maintain his masculinity in the white hegemony. In school, no classmate wants to sit with Pecola, and the teachers intentionally ignore her as well. The inter-racial complex deepens when the store owner and the priest devalue the significance of Pecola's presence. As a black girl educated with the knowledge of white beauty, Pecola hates herself in terms of "traces of self-hatred, racism and internalized racism" (McKittrick 135). Hating herself drives Pecola to go on the journey to look for the blue eyes. Pauline could only "seek approval in other's eyes" to internalize the virtue of white beauty (Vickroy 93). Yearning to be seen, Pecola is confined by an arbitrary discourse on beauty. The world rejects Pecola's right to be viewed as a human being free of verbal and physical violence. Morrison then uses Pecola's insanity in the end to disclose an absurd world where an innocent black girl must transform herself to comply with the white identity, which leaves readers room to ponder upon the story's representation of white authority.

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