

## THEME OF PROTEST IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

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### ABSTRACT

Racism involves the belief in racial differences, which acts as a justification for non- equal treatment of members of the race. The term is commonly used negatively and is usually associated with race – based prejudice. Racism is usually defined as views, practices and actions reflecting the belief that humanity is divided into distinct biological groups called races and that members of a certain race share certain attributes which make that group as a whole less desirable, more desirable, inferior or superior. In *The Bluest Eye* Toni Morrison, the novelist has created a racialized community. She has created a dualistic tale of the oppressors and the oppressed. The novel exposed or illustrates how the racism which exists within the African American community can be seen as an effect of the oppression and racism its members have been subjected to by the Whites and their protest against it.

**KEYWORDS:** Toni Morrison, the Bluest Eye, Protest

### INTRODUCTION

The novel, *The Bluest Eye* examines the tragic effects of imposing white American ideals of beauty on the developing female identity of a young African American girl named Pecola during the early 1940s. It keenly shows the psychological devastation of a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and devalues people of her own race. She is a neglected, abused and even hated child. She and everyone around her think that she is ugly and useless. However Pecola thinks that she has found the cure for her ugliness. If she were granted her wish for blue eyes she would in all certainly be regarded as beautiful. Pecola is subjected to racism both within her own race and by whites. The ideals of the country into which she is born do not apply to her. Moreover all the images on billboards and such are the images of white people, in the afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison writes about the real life girl who was the model for Pecola :

Implicit in her desire was 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?<sup>1</sup>

The belief Pecola has that she will become loveable through changing her appearance is indeed evidence of racial self hatred. Pecola thinks that only blue eyes can be remedy for her desperate situation. She is very lonely and shunned girl and the most important reason for her desire for blue eyes is that she wants to be treated differently by her family. There is a quotation in the book that exemplifies this “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.”<sup>2</sup> This indicates that her primary concern is escape from abuse and neglect within the home. Pecola tries to get people love by getting blue eyes. She knows that little girls with blue eyes are admired and adored so she wants to live up to that image. The choice of blue eyes is due to the racist society she has grown up in.

<sup>1</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 206. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 44. Print

Since Pecola has not witness love and affection at home she has a somewhat foggy idea of what it would like to be loved “What did love feel like? She wondered. How do grown-ups act when they love each other? Eat fish together?”<sup>3</sup> The only ones who ever talked to Pecola about love are the prostitutes who live upstairs from Pecola. One of them told Pecola about a man whom she loved in the past. They ate fish together so that is Pecola’s concept of what people do when they are in love. Pecola has no concept of what real love and affection are so she decides that have to do with the colour of your eyes. Both the community’s view that blue eyes are synonymous with beauty, and the fact that Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola’s mother is so fond of the blue eyed fisher girl contribute to this choice. Pecola has never had her mother’s affection the way the Fisher girl has where Mrs. Breedlove use to work.

One of the points Morrison protest against in her novel is that the self-contempt and self- hatred cannot end until African- Americans view themselves differently. As long as Pecola only achieves her value through the judgement of others she will feel like she is not beautiful and worthy:

Each night, without fail, she prayed to for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people.<sup>4</sup>

An incident at Mrs. Breedlove’s workplace starts Pecola’s journey from being a troubled little girl to becoming insane. While Mrs. Pauline Breedlove is downstairs collecting the laundry Pecola accidentally knocks over a blueberry cobbler. Instead of comforting Pecola Mrs. Breedlove scolds her. She hits Pecola and calls her crazy fool before she walks and comforts the Fisher girl. Even the fact that white girl can call her Polly while Pecola has to call her Mrs. Breedlove symbolize the mother’s preference for the white girl. Furthermore the incident also symbolizes that Pauline does not want to acknowledge that Pecola is her daughter:

“Pick up that wash and get out of here, so I can get this mess cleaned up.”

... As Pecola put the laundry bag in the wagon, we could hear Mrs. Breedlove hushing and soothing the tears of the little pink-and- yellow girl...“Who were they Polly?”...“Hush. Don’t worry none,” she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake.<sup>5</sup>

An already disappointed girl once again gets proof that she is not loved and not wanted. To be rejected by the person who should love Pecola the most have affected on her already low self- esteem. What finally pushes Pecola over the edge is being raped by her own father and becoming pregnant by him. In this way Morrison protest against racism and shows that racism and oppression do not exist in the moment. The person who is subjected to them internalizes the shame and bitterness and when those feelings are let out other people will be hurt. They will perhaps in return continue the vicious circle. We can say that Mr. Breedlove rapes Pecola her own daughter because during Cholly’s first encounter with sex, a natural human experience, is perverted by two white hunters.

“There was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it”.<sup>6</sup> The ease with which hunters demand Cholly to continue intercourse with Darlene is reminiscent of the systematic mating strategies slave owners practiced with only 'breeding' in mind.

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<sup>3</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 55. Print.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 44. Print.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 107. Print.

This humiliating and dehumanizing experience creates within Cholly a hatred for women which is demonstrated later in the novel by his domestic violence toward his wife and the molestation of his daughter. When Pecola has gone mad we learn that Mrs. Breedlove betrayal may be equal to Mr. Breedlove's. Pecola has told her about the rape but Mrs. Breedlove did not believe her. Pecola speaks to her imaginary friend after she has gone insane:

*I wonder what it would be like.*

Horrible.

*Really?*

Yes. Horrible.

*Then why didn't you tell Mrs. Breedlove?*

I did tell her!

*I don't mean about the first time. I mean about the second time, when you were sleeping on the couch.*

I was'nt sleeping! I was reading!

*You don't have to shout.*

You don't understand anything, do you? She didn't even believe me when I told her.

*So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time?*

She wouldn't have believe me either.

*You're right. No use telling her when she wouldn't believe you.*<sup>7</sup>

Even though she has got both the friend she has longed for and her blue eyes but still in her deranged mind she starts to worry that her eyes might not be blue enough to make her loveable and admired. She wants her imaginary friend to tell her "If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eye. The bluest eyes in the whole world."<sup>8</sup> Her fear is that if some else's eyes are bluer than hers she will slide back to her old existence. The blue eyes will have lost their power. The reason behind Pecola's fear is the family and the community surrounding her. When society is racist against a person, the victim can avoid those but when the most dear, the family have rejected themselves and their relationship, there is no escape from the pain. At this point a person will become completely immersed in misery and go insane. The family Pecola Breedlove grew up in was spread throughout with racial self hatred. The family's single belief was that they were ugly. They all thought so and consequently so did Pecola:

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "you are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every movie, every glance. "Yes," they had said. "You are right." And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as mantle over them, and went about the world with it.<sup>9</sup>

The implication is that billboards and movies are portraying only whites as beautiful. They are flooded with

<sup>6</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 145. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 198. Print.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 201. Print.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 37. Print.

images of the dominant culture and that is destroying the family's self esteem. The most important influence on Pecola is of her mother Pauline. She is the one who has been closest to Pecola. Pauline's own contempt for herself and her living conditions has great influence on Pecola. Furthermore a woman who reacts to her new born child in the manner Pauline did cannot help but transfer contempt to her. Pauline says of the new born Pecola that she had a "head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly."<sup>10</sup> The reason for Pauline's reaction is probably that Pecola had dark complexion and looked like Pauline.

Pauline internalizes society's love of white beauty to such a degree that she views herself as worthless unless she can attain that standard. Because she is unable to relate to any of the women in the North, Pauline frequently visits the movie theater "along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another---physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity and ended in disillusion".<sup>11</sup>

The primer preceding the section about Pauline discusses a nice mother who plays with her daughter. This is far from Pauline's reality. Pauline has stopped taking care of her own house hold a long time ago and lives for the time she spends with the Fishers. Pauline escapes or protests against her pain and hardship when she was at work. The Fisher mansion has become a heaven to her. Pauline adores the cleanness of the Fisher household. It is clear that she does not want her life with her family to interfere with her life at the beautiful mansion down by the lake. In short we can say that in Fisher household she can escape into a cocoon where she is appreciated and were everything seems beautiful:

When she bathed the little Fisher girl, it was in a porcelain tub with slivery taps running infinite quantity of hot, clear water. She dried her in fluffy white towels and put her in cuddly night clothes. Then she brushed the yellow hair, enjoying the roll and slip of it between her fingers. No zinc tub, no buckets of stove heated water, no flaky, stiff, grayish towels washed in the kitchen sink, dried in a dusty backyard, no tangled black puffs of rough wool to comb.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the above quotation that she prefers not only the Fisher home with all its modern conveniences but also that she actually prefers the Fisher girl to her own Pecola and the rest of family as peripheral to Pauline as they are "the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely."<sup>13</sup>

The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when Cholly, her own father rapes her. His tenderness and protectiveness, however, unfortunately slip into lust and rage which he directs at Pecola and all those like her bore witness to her failure. Cholly is abandoned by his father before his birth, abandoned by his mother nine days after birth, and is rescued and raised by his grandmother. Cholly is also disturbed by the fact that he is not his father's namesake. When Cholly asks his grandmother why he isn't named after his own father, his grandmother replies:

He wasn't nowhere around when you was born. Your mama didn't name you nothing. The nine days wasn't up before she throwed you on the junk heap. When I got you I named you myself on the ninth day. You named after my dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man. Ain't no Samson never come to no good end.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 126. Print.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 120. Print.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 125. Print.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 99. Print.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 133. Print.

Cholly's formation of self-identity is delayed not only by the abandonment of his birth parents but also by the origin of his name. Cholly is upset because he is not named after his father, but instead he is the namesake of a distant relative who is deceased before Cholly is born. Since Cholly cannot identify with anyone he is related to, he lacks any resemblance of a sense of self and his maturation is stunted, which makes it easier for Cholly to internalize society's racism. Even Cholly's first encounter with sex, a natural human experience, is perverted by two white hunters.

Sammy (Pecola's brother) spends most of his time on the run so he is not there to help Pecola when she is in need. The common factor in the Breedlove family seems to be that every member of the family feels ugly. Most of the part it has to do with their own perception of their blackness "You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction."<sup>15</sup>

The surrounding community is another cause for Pecola's insanity. In the surrounding community intra-racism is prevalent and they have all at some point participated in the scapegoating of Pecola. The children at school would tease her primarily because she was dark skinned "Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsneked. Black e mo black e mo ya dad sleeps nekke. Black e mo..."<sup>16</sup>

They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: The color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds---cooled---and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. They danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom, for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit.

The "Black e mo" part of the quotation means that Pecola was even more black than they were. As a result even those who were not particularly light skinned themselves took the chance to tease and make fun of someone who was darker than they were. The school Pecola attends before her pregnancy it is important to have a fair skin. The most popular girl in school is Maureen because she is half white she has the lightest skin of the coloured children. Claudia, the narrator describes her as a "high yellow dream child". Maureen gets the best treatment from students and teachers alike. They are all enchanted with her. She has the respect of black and white pupils alike. It seems that the only reason for this treatment is the fact that Maureen is the whitest of the coloured children and the fact that she has lot of money.

Maureen is, apart from the Mac. Teer sisters, the only child who shows Pecola any kindness. It does not last very long however. When the children get into the argument Maureen yells from across the street "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I *am* cute!"<sup>17</sup> it seems as if "black e mo" is the worst name you could be called. It is an insult based on the children's degree of blackness. Being a black e mo is the most degrading thing in this community.

Morrison also uses popular figures from the 1940s to show the acceptance of African Americans towards the "white beauty". This is first seen when Mrs. Breedlove tries to imitate the hair style of Jean Harlow the white movie star but while chewing on candy, she breaks her tooth. Morrison uses this as a reminder of Breedlove's blackness. "*There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then.*

<sup>15</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 28. Print.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 50. Print.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 71. Print.

*Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly.*"<sup>18</sup> Secondly when Mr. Henry arrives at the Mac. Teer's house, greets Claudia and Frieda with "Hello there. You must be Greta Garbo, and you must be Ginger Rogers."<sup>19</sup> Garbo, a mysterious movie star and Rogers, a dancer, were both white, leading to the reader to assume that white women were used to describe pretty girls of black community. Pecola Breedlove who comes to live at the Mac. Teer household, stares at the picture of Shirley Temple, white movie star engraved on one of their glasses, and, in the process, drinks three quarts of milk in order to touch the Shirley Temple cup:

"Three quarts of milk. That's what was *in* that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop. I don't mind coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does *anybody* need with *three* quarts of milk?"<sup>20</sup>

The "folks" my mother was referring to was Pecola. The three of us, Pecola Frieda, and I, listened to her. Downstairs in the kitchen fussing about the amount of milk Pecola had drunk. We knew 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.

Another incident related to the acceptance of African Americans towards the white beauty is when Pecola one day goes into a store to buy three Mary Jane candies from Mr. Yacobowski, the shopkeeper. He gave her the candy so carefully that he doesn't touch her hands. Pecola feels humiliated, tears come into her eyes, but she is able to stop crying by eating Mary Jane candies and looking at the white girl on the wrapper. She sees the "smiling white face" and the "blue eyes looking her out of a world of clean comfort."

The only character in *The Bluest Eye* that seems to be unaffected by mainstream culture is Claudia Mac. Teer. As Frieda and Pecola converse about how cute Shirley Temple is, Claudia becomes disgusted. She hates Shirley because "she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me."<sup>21</sup> At Christmas also the loving gift to Claudia from parents was a doll with blue eyes and blond hair. It was expected that every girl should want one. However Claudia does not. She wants to destroy the blond doll. She lashes out these symbols, tearing of their eyes and heads in an effort to find out what it was in them, that the entire world said was loveable:

"Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows; picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips. Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair, twist the head around, and the thing that made one sound—a sound they said was the sweet and plaintive cry "Mama," but which sounded to be like the bleat of a dying lamb, or, more precisely, our icebox door opening on rusty hinges in July. Remove the cold and stupid eyeball, it would bleat still, "Ahhhhhh," take off the head, shake out the sawdust, crack the back... I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound."<sup>22</sup>

Claudia who is younger than Pecola and Frieda have not learned the social codes yet. She does not understand what is so special about the white girls and she is jealous of the attention they received.

<sup>18</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 121. Print.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 14. Print.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 21. Print.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 17. Print.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 210. Print.

Geraldine, a mother of one of the boys at Pecola's school, knows the difference between the dark complexion and a fair complexion. Geraldine is perhaps the person, aside from Pecola, who is most tormented by the colour of her skin. Geraldine is light-skinned but her fear of being black is very large. Geraldine hates darker skinned blacks. She strives to be much like a middle class white woman. One day when Geraldine finds Pecola in her home she is disgusted. "Get out," she said, her voice quiet. "You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house."<sup>23</sup> In other words we can say that Gurlen Grewal is true in her statement that the reason behind Geraldine explodes Pecola is that her "virtuous stability is built upon the repression of her embodied blackness."<sup>24</sup> Pecola represents everything Geraldine finds disgusting and degrading "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 ask everything."<sup>25</sup>

Geraldine has taught her son the difference between coloured person and a nigger. She does not want her son to risk their positions as respectable coloured folk:

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. He belonged to the former group: he 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. Even though he was light skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch had to be constant.<sup>26</sup>

After Pecola becomes pregnant she went to Soaphead Church, who was a "faith healer" he claims that he speaks to God. Pecola asks him for blue eyes but he was misguided by the believe that the girl would be helped by living with the delusion that she has blue eyes. "I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do."<sup>27</sup> The real reason for Soaphead Church's actions can be found in his own background. He comes from a family of people who have tried their best for generations to marry someone whiter to thin out the family features and become whiter with each generation. In Soaphead Church family every achievement is credited to the white strain of the blood. He is a con artist indeed, but when the little girl comes to him with her wish with her wish for blue eyes Soaphead Church really wishes that he could help her.

Thus the novel, *The Bluest Eye*, indicates a black girl's quest for white values. Pecola, a black girl, wants to have blue eyes because she relates beauty to being loved and believes that if she possesses blue eyes, the cruelty in her life will be replaced by affection and respect. Pecola's mother, who works as a housekeeper in a white family, lavishes all her love and affection on her employer's children and beats her own daughter just because of her ugliness. The ultimate act of brutalization and betrayal for Pecola comes when Cholly, her own father rapes her. His tenderness and protectiveness, however, unfortunately slip into lust and rage which he directs at Pecola and all those like her bore witness to her failure. Thus, Pecola, protests against all the gestures/acts of ill treatment by remaining silent and goes mad, believing that her long cherished dream of having blue eyes has fulfilled. Some other characters also protest against racism in this novel like Mr. Breedlove protested against racism by abusing his wife and children, Claudia by destroying the white dolls,

<sup>23</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 90. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Grewal, Gurlen. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle*. (U.S.A. Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 29. Print.

<sup>25</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 72. Print.

<sup>26</sup> Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. (London: Vintage Books, 1999), 85. Print.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 87. Print.

Mrs. Breedlove by watching movies and working in Fisher's home and lastly Geraldine by adopting the white values. In other words we can say that the novelist too vehemently protests against racism by exposing the ill effects of racism on Afro- Americans.

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