

The demise of the ugly black girl in the bluest eye



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“ How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?’ But Frieda was asleep. And I didn’t know” (Morrison 32). The innocent question posed by Pecola from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is representative of a recurring theme in the novel: love. However, while Pecola feels anxiety about finding someone that will love her, she doesn’t even realize how many horrible things have already happened to her and just how many more are going to occur. Each atrocious, brutal occurrence takes a little more of Pecola’s sanity away, resulting in the empty shell of a long-gone little girl that has lost everything, especially her lone shred of original “ beauty” that is innocence. The primary victimization of Pecola is the constant berating of the fact that she is ugly by the white definition of beauty. The first example of Pecola’s feeble attempt to gain the knowledge of how to become beautiful is the unnatural amount of milk she drinks just to see the bottom of the Shirley Temple glass. Mrs. MacTeer’s “ fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed... they were interminable, insulting, and although indirect (Mama never named anybody- just talked about folks and some people), extremely painful in their thrust” (24). Mrs. MacTeer believes Pecola drank all the milk because she was selfish, although obviously Pecola learns nothing about beauty. The second person to wound Pecola’s sense of beauty was Mr. Yacobowski who, in refusing to even touch her, reinforced her thought that white people hated her ugliness. On page 48 a quote summed up Pecola’s thoughts succinctly: “ She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition- the glazed separateness... It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is distaste... the distaste must be for her, her blackness” (48). Although these passive situations negatively affected Pecola’s self-image,

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they did not directly damage her in the way that some characters damage her. A character that did openly injure Pecola is her own father, Cholly Breedlove. Cholly's drunken stupors destroy the family from the inside out, resulting in the house fire that ruined their home and his lack of caring for Pauline and his own children. These drunken fits also result in the rape of Pecola's body, heart, and mind. Cholly even believes her to be ugly but he drunkenly believes that this rape is an act of showing love, his tangled mass of emotions exhibited in a quote from page 161, " The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, and then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence... Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child- unburdened- why wasn't she happy?" The feelings of guilt and pity stemmed from his feeling that he could give her nothing and she needed to feel such love. The feelings of love he exhibited in his acts of rape irreversibly damage Pecola's mind in such a way that she is unable to ever regain her sanity. Cholly's act of love, although perverted, is the only example of anyone actually even attempting to love Pecola. In comparison to Cholly's action, Maureen Peal tries to befriend Pecola in order to dig into Pecola's brain. Maureen is described as " A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back... black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilet, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids" (62). This description of Maureen exemplifies the reverence that black girls had to afford her just because she was one of supreme beauty, even though she wasn't even white, just " high-yellow." Maureen even has the immorality to pretend to be Pecola's friend just to interrogate her about her naked father. A fight then ensues between Claudia and Frieda and Maureen where " Pecola tucked her

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head in- a funny, sad, helpless, movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears” (72). This evokes the image of a turtle instinctively pulling its head into its shell for protection. This incident shows the contrast between the helplessness of Pecola against the hardened exterior of Frieda and Claudia who vehemently defend themselves against the barrage of insults from Maureen. Pecola is also violated by many other characters, although differently in that they didn’t directly involve insulting Pecola’s already low amount of self-respect and beauty. Although she is physically and emotionally upset from her playground experience with Bay Boy, Woodrow Cain, and Junie Bug, this event is insignificant compared to the trauma associated with Pecola’s mother. Pauline works hard in the Fisher’s home, but when Pecola visits her and spills the berry cobbler, Pauline becomes so violently angry that she beats Pecola severely even after she had been burnt by the cobbler. The cutting irony of the situation was that after she beat Pecola, Pauline or “ Polly,” as she’s insolently called, soothed and mothered the crying Fisher girl. As Claudia and Frieda witness this, they realize that Pecola needs the attention of her mother. Claudia and Frieda were at the Fishers’ house because of their own selfish reason. They wanted to find liquor because they thought it would make Frieda skinny, who had been “ ruined” by Mr. Henry. Claudia believes they need whiskey for Frieda because “ Mama says whiskey ate them [the prostitutes] up” (101). They took their mothers words literally and thought that whiskey would eat the fat of Frieda’s ruined appearance. They figured that the only place they might be able to get whiskey was Pecola because Cholly was a drunk. For these selfish reasons, even Claudia and Frieda weren’t truly Pecola’s friends. The

selfishness of the MacTeer sisters is only paralleled in the agenda of Soaphead Church. Elihue Micah Whitcomb exploits Pecola's innocent request for blue eyes. From her request, Soaphead Church wishes he could actually help her, and is angry that he cannot. He then forces himself to try to be as truthful as possible and allow the Lord to take over the decision of her wish for blue eyes. Then Elihue tells her that she must sacrifice Bob the dog in order to have "some simple creature... be the vehicle through which He will speak" (175). Although Soaphead seems to be truly sorry for his lack of power, he doesn't recognize that he lied about his exploitive occupation. Also he isn't sorry that Pecola thinks that she's ugly, but pities her because he actually believes she is ugly and will remain that way. This is reinforcement to Pecola's thought that she is ugly. Louis Junior also took advantage of Pecola by inviting her into the house to play with kittens. Geraldine loves the cat and because of this, Junior is jealous of the attention the cat receives. Since his middle-class black mother doesn't allow him to play with other black children, and he isn't white, he expels his anger through abusing the cat. When Pecola enters the house, Louis Junior throws the cat at her and then throws it against the window. Then Geraldine comes home, which prompted Junior to blame Pecola, who Geraldine tells "Get out... you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house." This just causes Pecola to then see "Jesus looking down at her with sad and unsurprised eyes, his long brown hair parted in the middle, the gay paper flowers twisted around his face" (93). The second part of the quote also sets up a contrast between the ugliness of Pecola against the beauty of Jesus. The last significant example of other characters taking advantage of Pecola is, again, Claudia and Frieda. They wanted Pecola to have her baby just because they "felt a need for someone

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to want the baby to live- just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals” (190). Claudia and Frieda didn’t care that Pecola was raped or that she was raped by her father. The sisters’ silent victimization is unbeknownst to Pecola but at this point of her declining sanity, it doesn’t make a difference. This is a lead-in to the final, ultimate victimizer: Pecola. Pecola creates her own hallucination of an imaginary friend, since she has no one else to turn to. She believes that she has the blue eyes that she wished for and, in conversing with her imaginary friend, realizes that someone may have bluer eyes. This leads her to feel insecure even about her imaginary blue eyes. This final victimization of herself leads to the meaning of the novel.” So it was. A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (204). This quote expresses the meaning that Pecola associates being black with being ugly. Each scathing instance of victimization serves to confuse the ideas of beauty and love within Pecola. Combined with the constant abuse Pecola feels because she believes herself to be ugly, the confusion eventually forces her to attempt to achieve perceived exterior beauty by gaining blue eyes. This leads to the explanation of the second part of the quote: that Pecola’s worst victimization exists in her delusion of satisfying her want of blue eyes, at least in her mind. As a result of all the abuse that she so willingly took, from her family, so-called friends, and even herself, the only truth that exists for Pecola was her own insanity.