

Societal expectations in the bluest eye



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores the burdens society places on its weakest members and the adverse effects they have on the individual's mental stability and self worth. Society has expectations of beauty and worth that teach the individual to be unsatisfied with themselves and strive for certain characteristics: blue eyes, blonde hair, light skin. In Pecola's case we see the judgement of society thrust upon her due to the color of her skin, her gender, and the poverty her family lives in, all of which run contrary to the American ideal of the time. The discrepancies between the perceived perfection, which no one will ever be able to live up to, and reality, fosters insecurities that are present within each of Morrison's characters. The constant barrage of preconceived notions, particularly when compared to the Breedloves, contribute to the superficial nature of society which Morrison casts a light on to further the idea that unrealistic expectations foster a mindset of imperfection that distracts from a person's inherently good nature.

Pecola and all African Americans are marginalized within the novel. Morrison writes, " Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment". There was no way for African Americans to significantly raise their social status because they could not change the color of their skin. Even the " colored people", who thought of themselves, and in a sense, were more educated and orderly than the " niggers" they choose not to associate with, were still considered lower class. The color of a person's skin literally determined their worth to society as opposed to their merit. This hostile and seemingly permanent outlook is

detrimental to the mindsets of all African Americans within the novel, specifically to Pecola and her family. Opposed to other families in their community, the Breedloves have little emotional connection and familial support between them. For Pecola this leaves her especially vulnerable to outside influence because she has no loving place to return to tell her she is beautiful. Instead the entire family almost relishes in the fact that they are “ugly” and wallows in self hatred. The Breedlove’s live in a storefront which displays their poverty and flaws to the world; they want to leave, but “ They lived there because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly”. They dont have the ability nor willpower to leave since society has given them only one choice: to be poor, Black, and ugly. In the midst of this situation, Pecola dreams of something better; it’s a sad comment on the state of our society when an innocent child believes that being white will solve the entirety of her problems. Pecola idolizes the dolls and the “ Shirley Temples” of the world because they have stability which she craves. Pecola attributes the love and care they receive to their skin color and therefore wants her own pair of blue eyes. Pecola’s childish, and yet extremely perceptive, association between skin color and quality of life is utilized by Morrison to point out the way society is run. Still today skin color has an effect on opportunity, so it doesn’t sound like such an unreasonable thing to try and change your appearance to allow yourself more social mobility. People try and change themselves, like Pecola wishing for blue eyes, to fit expectations; but, it’s the expectations that need to be changed not the people themselves. The community in the novel and mankind in general tend to only look “ skin deep”, without acknowledging the damaging effects their quick, biased judgement has.

Being a young girl also contributes to Pecola's helplessness. In the novel, Black women take orders from white men, white women, white children, and Black men; the only people they give orders to are black children, but as a black girl, Pecola is subservient to everyone. All the slight societal inequalities that the African community faced, when applied to Pecola, are exacerbated further making them clearly exposed. Because of her gender, bad things are allowed to easily happen to Pecola. Yes boys were could have been treated in a similar fashion, but the way females are so subdued in early-modern American culture, makes her an easier target than a boy. She is abused and essentially used as an object to absorb people's anger and insecurity. Claudia observes, " All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her". Nobody cares when Pecola is treated badly since she's the weakest member of society. She's taken advantage of and people relish in her imperfectness because it makes them perfect in comparison, even if they fail to live up to the ideal. Being a girl not only makes her an easier target but also gives her more standards of beauty to emulate. Men generally have more power than women, so imperfections surrounding men are less evident. Even the historical references Morrison focuses on are almost exclusively female; for example, she frequently lists Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. All the models of " perfect human specimens" are woman. The obvious omission of ideal male specimens sets precedent for the fact that beauty is more important when evaluating the worth of woman than of men. Hollywood perpetuates this; it spreads the concept that physical beauty is necessary for women and almost all encompassing. Beauty is "

Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in dissolution". Pecola's low self esteem because she is ugly culminates unconstrained desire for blue eyes since she see's it as the only way out of her feeble position.

The title of the novel, *The Bluest Eyes*, is in reference to Pecola's desire to change her eye color from brown to blue. She hopes that by getting a pair of blue eyes she will see the world from a better and brighter perspective than her brown ones afford her. In order to be content with oneself, people must work on the internal, their emotions, instead of focusing on the external because appearance is meaningless with respect to happiness. People don't do this. Instead, they seek to enhance themselves physically to fill the void emotionally because it's easier than dealing with the root of their insecurities. No one can blame Pecola for trying to find a hope to latch on to in order to escape her reality, however, the rest of humanity has no excuse for hiding behind their designer clothes and fake lashes. Soaphead Church is humbled by her plight: " Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty.... A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes". By the end of the novel, Pecola is completely broken, body and soul. Her mental faculties have diminished and she recedes into herself as a self protection mechanism against the world that was so cruel. She gets her blue eyes in the end. Pecola is the only one who can see them, but they are there nonetheless. What matters is not if they actually exist, but the confidence they impart unto her. What Pecola starts to realize, but quickly buries, is the notion that there is always someone with " bluer eyes". The small thought is almost enough to destroy the carefully built

happiness she created in her delusion. One can have “ the bluest eyes” and still be blind to obvious truths.