

Blue eyes for white beauty



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In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, three young African American girls (among many others in their society) struggle against a culture that defines them as ugly and/or invisible. They are regularly contrasted with symbols of whiteness and white icons: the white film star, Shirley Temple, the face of Mary Jane on candy wrappers, and the white baby dolls they are given as gifts and expected to love. The mothers of these girls contribute to the promotion of a cycle of self-hatred and to the conformity to white standards of beauty by admiring the young white girls in their community and in the media instead of finding beauty in their own black children. Their daughters, then, are faced with the harsh reality that they are inferior to the "beautiful" little white girls, and must decide whether to continue to yield to this cycle of degradation and oppression or to define beauty in their own terms. One character in particular, Pecola Breedlove, tragically succumbs to this system of oppression in a way that results in the dissolution of her identity. To Pecola, the acquisition of beauty signifies the potential to attain the things in her life that she has never had: attention, love, blue eyes, and ultimately, whiteness. In praying for blue eyes, Pecola prays to be white, the one thing that she believes will solve all of her problems. Pecola's story is chronicled by her pursuit of beauty. Her experiences are recorded over the course of four seasons in which she endures a detrimental environment at home, at school, and in her neighborhood. Her mother's energies are focused on devoting her utmost attention to her job as a housekeeper for a white family. Her father is an alcoholic who ends up sexually abusing her more than once. Teachers ignore Pecola in the classroom, instead giving their attention to Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child with long brown hair" and "sloe green eyes" (Morrison 47, 48). In addition, Pecola's classmates ridicule her

for her ugliness, although they too are black. Through all of these experiences, Pecola becomes marginalized by a culture that defines whiteness as beautiful and lovable. Thus, Pecola begins her search for beauty in an effort to answer the question, “ how do you get somebody to love you?” (Morrison 32). The answer, she decides, is to have blue eyes – and thus, essentially, to be white. Pecola feels ugly because in her mind, skin and eye color are directly linked to ideal beauty. The beauty that is emphasized in American culture is that of white women, and Pecola must either deny this and find a way to form her own identity based on her beliefs, or conform to the white ideals being constantly thrust at her. Sadly, because of the conditions in which she lives, conforming to this ideal of white beauty and attempting to attain it seems like the only way for Pecola to escape the harshness of the reality in which she lives. By wishing for blue eyes day in and day out, she gives herself hope that one day she will be beautiful and loved. Unfortunately, the symbols of beauty that Pecola chooses to focus on are not within reach for her and never will be. Shirley Temple’s hair will always be yellow and her smile will never vanish because she is an actress and is always seen on film. The skin and eyes of the white dolls will never change – they will always look the same because the dolls are not real people. The reason Pecola feels so ugly is based mainly off of the fact that she spends her time comparing herself to the unreal. Whether or not these symbols and icons are in fact beautiful, it would be impossible for Pecola to ever transform herself to such an extent. By trying to conform to everyone else’s ideas of beauty instead of determining her own, Pecola never actually obtains what she wants. She thinks blue eyes are attractive and beautiful solely because society thinks blue eyes are beautiful. Society’s approval of

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these blue eyes, of this whiteness, fuels Pecola's desire, for all she wants is to be loved and accepted. Her conformity to these societal ideals does not lead to her true satisfaction, however, because the blue eyes that she believes she has do not actually exist. The novel introduces the reader to the incongruity between Pecola's real world and the idealistic white world at its very beginning with a passage from a Dick and Jane Reader. The sentences of the passage are presented three times, and each time the words become closer together, spacing disappears, and all sense of order is eventually eliminated. There are no boundaries by the end of the third paragraph; the clear structure of the Dick and Jane storybook world is ruined, as is Pecola's life by the end of the novel. The Breedloves, Pecola's family, are most likely the people in the Reader. Mrs. Breedlove, the Mother, does not play with Pecola - instead she knocks her down in the kitchen of her white employers when Pecola unintentionally spills the blueberry cobbler, and then turns to pacify the white girl who calls her Polly. There is no compassion for Mrs. Breedlove's black child, but there is for the white child who does not belong to her. This is the inverted world in which Pecola lives, and this is why her attempts at conforming to the idyllic white world, that of the storybook, do not work. As the title of the novel implies, Pecola's one desire is to have blue eyes, which to her epitomize beauty and would enable her to surpass her ugliness and the ugliness of her life, and maybe even change the behavior of her parents. Pecola idolizes the beautiful white icons of the 1940s: she drinks three quarts of milk at the MacTeers' house just so she can use the Shirley Temple cup, buys Mary Janes at the candy store so that she can admire the picture of the blond-haired, blue-eyed girl on the wrapper, and even decides to go to Soaphead Church in the hopes that he will make her eyes blue. By

the end of the novel, Pecola truly believes she has blue eyes, and her misapprehension shows the sad truth for a young African American girl who opts to embrace these white American ideals because she sees no other way out.