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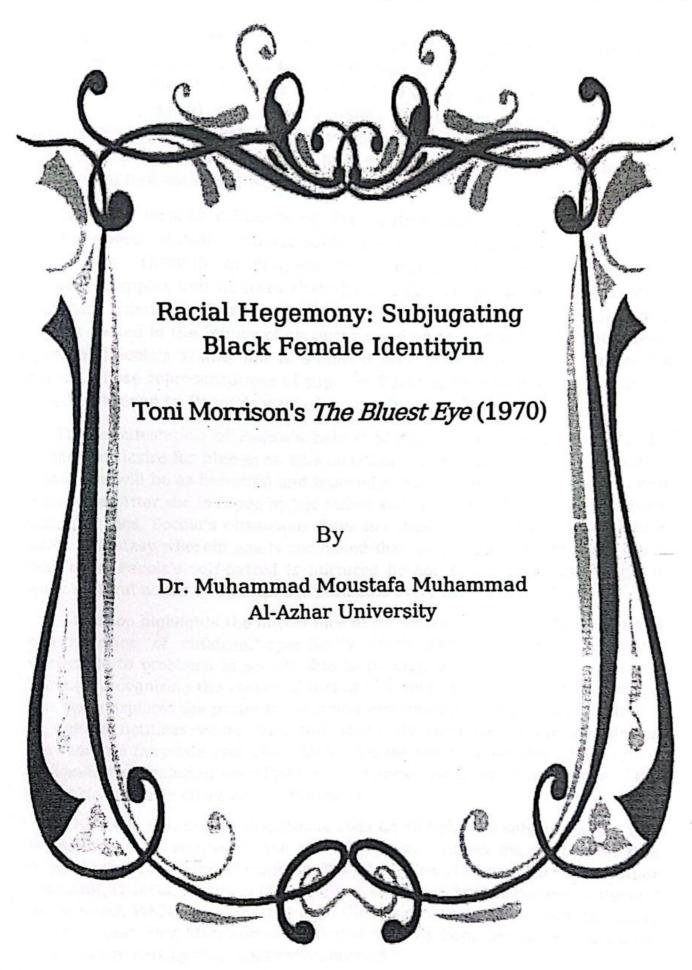


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Abstract

Despite the enormous critical approaches done on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the Nobel Laureate's first novel, none has referred to its resemblance to the Snow White fairy tale. All of Morrison's novels turn to the complex racial, social and cultural issues that impact Africans in America. Empirical evidence suggests that these phenomena are the legacy of slavery. As a famous literary tale, the fairy tale features in the novel through the mirror as a patriarchal tool enslaving women.

The study focuses primarily on Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old girl who has been socially indoctrinated through a system of rewards and punishments. Through observation and participation, Pecola develops an inferiority complex and believes that she is ugly and that African standards of beauty are inferior to European standards. The emasculation of Pecola's self-image is rooted in the legacy of slavery passed on to her by her parents. Every aspect of Pecola's young life is stamped and represented with Eurocentric imagery. These representations of superior Eurocentric aesthetic standards are super-heightened by Pecola's view of divinity in white flesh.

The manifestation of Pecola's hatred of her self-image is represented by her fervent desire for blue eyes. She constantly prays for her eyes to turn blue so that she will be as beautiful and beloved as all the blond, blue-eyed children in America. After she is raped by her father and gives birth to a premature baby that later dies, Pecola's obsessions drive her insane and she withdraws into a world of fantasy wherein she is convinced that no one has eyes that are bluer than hers. Pecola's self-hatred is nurtured by her social environment where white cultural norms and aesthetics permeate every aspect of her being.

Morrison highlights the importance of recognizing the dehumanization and objectification of children, specifically black girls, who are often most vulnerable to problems in society due to poverty, gender, and racial identity. Through recognizing the racial subtext in "fairness" as associated with beauty, this study explores the problem the young African-American girls face by trying to imitate fictitious white fairy tale icons. By referring to the parallelism between the fairy tale and *The Bluest Eye*, the study shows the image of the broken mirror featuring literally as a metaphor of the fragmented psyche of the major black female characters in the novel.

The study also proves that Pecola does try to fight her subjection, but it is impossible to be avoided at the end. The study reaches the conclusion that Pecola is the truest kind of victim in *The Bluest Eye*. However, through another character, Claudia, Morrison gives a gleam of hope to her characters at the end of the novel. While resolving that even Claudia's voice is amputated, the study proposes that what Morrison is offering is not only hope but an invocation for all women to destroy their captivating mirrors.





In the Greek legend of Narcissus, Nemesis, the goddess of revenge and retribution, cast a spell on Narcissus to make him fall in love with his own image in a pool of water; there, he stayed mesmerized by his own reflection till he died. The reflected image in the water/mirror does not exist so that Narcissus can find within himself a living ideal; it is a matter of the mirror as a seductive medium, as an alluring objet d' art that others find fascinating, only to be swallowed by it. The myth, however, implies that what Narcissus sees is not himself but a reversed and magnified reflection, that is, a "fallacious image" of his own form (Ovid 104).

The mirror, as a narcissistic medium, has been applied most damagingly to women throughout centuries of literary tradition. When applied to women, the mirror transcends being a device that measures beauty to be reflected back and judged by the viewer; it becomes a measurement of the feminine identity. Theoretically speaking, women are confined to a closed relation of self-looking, and so they become trapped in their own images. Unable to transcend this closed relation, women become incapable of releasing their otherness. According to J. C. Cirlot, the mirror is generally known as a feminist symbol for "its reflection and passive characteristics" (211). Set as a symbol associated with femininity, mirrors serve as a metaphor for self-reflection, self-confidence, and self-worth. In this discourse, the image of a female looking into a mirror has come to signify both the representation of women as visual objects, as well as societal projections regarding the female character.

Virginia Woolf takes the notion of the mirror's femininity to a whole new level that is related to the female's position in a male-dominated world. In "A Room of One's Own," she describes women as "looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (217). The inferiority of a woman aggrandizes the man and assures his superiority even more than her inferiority. Based on the concept of the magnifying mirror, women can be regarded as mirrors for men, and as dependent on a man's gaze for a sense of self.

Literature is replete with images of women contemplating their reflection. One of the most famous mirror tales is perhaps the fairy tale of Snow White. What creates the plot in the fairy tale is the wicked Queen, who is "locked" in her magic looking glass. The Queen's desire to be "the fairest of all" imprisons her in what comes to be considered a



patriarchal tool, the enchanting mirror. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar take Virginia Woolf's concept of the female as the man's looking glass further by suggesting that the voice of the physically absent king resides in the Queen's mirror, "His, surely, is the patriarchal voice of the Queen's and woman's self every rules judgment that evaluation"(38). Thus, the female does not only magnify the image of the man, but also falls victim to his own dictations through the lethal charm of the mirror. This theory of deriving self recognition from the distorted image in the mirror is adopted by African American writer Toni Morrison in her first novel The Bluest Eye. In fact, Morrison has stated that the central metaphor in the novel is "the visual image of a splintered mirror," an image that constitutes both "the form as well as the content of The Bluest Eye" ("Memory" 388).

By adopting the image of a splintered mirror, Morrison creates female characters fragmented by race, class and gender. Severe social stigmatization transforms them into splintered mirrors instead of mere magnifying ones like other women. The most severely splintered mirror in the novel is the twelve-year-old African American Pecola Breedlove who, at the end, goes insane, evidently due to the grotesque effects of the "demonization of an entire race" and how it takes root inside the "most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" (Morrison "Afterword" 210). Raped by her own father, abandoned by her mother, used as a scapegoat to her own race and led to the belief that she is ugly, Pecola wishes the only token of love she knows: to have the bluest eyes of all. Failed by her mirror, Pecola chases not that which hides behind the eyes but that which lies behind the mirror.

Pecola's insanity radiates femininity. In her magic mirror, Pecola visualizes an internal "other" that looks upon her through a shared set of imaginary blue eyes. Her fragmented self creates a dialogue with the fractured image reflected in the mirror. This scene alludes to the Queen who puts Snow White to sleep because she wants to be "the fairest one of all." Thus, the fairy tale of Snow White manifests itself as an ironic mirror for Pecola's story. Pecola's dialogue also with her invisible double, a contrast to her previous silence, recalls the Queen's obsession to be the fairest of all.

In her article, "Behind the Making of the Black Book," Toni Morrison states:



The concept of beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world [...] Concentrating on whether we are beautiful is a way of measuring worth that is wholly trivial and wholly white and preoccupation with it is an irrevocable slavery of the senses. (89)

By using the racial subtext in the "fairness" of beauty, Morrison touches upon how people did, and still do, associate certain codes of behavior and attitudes to an individual's color. She also shows how such powerful notions can affect even the most noble, natural human affection: motherhood love.

Unable to reach the alleged standards of beauty, neatness and civilized behavior, Pecola and her mother escape from their realities to seek refuge in fantasies. Pecola's mother, in the false order of her employer's house, embraces the idea of being an ideal servant, and Pecola believes that she has the bluest eyes of all. The mirror, however, plays a great role in these characters' lives. Through the mirror, the heroines of The Bluest Eye become epitomic examples of visual objectification. However, the size and severity of the splintered image varies from one character to another. Pecola's mother, Pauline, can be seen as the first fractured piece of the mirror, but she is, arguably, the one who constructed her own splintered mirror, not only for herself but also for her daughter.

Upon marrying Cholly, Pauline is uprooted and eventually suffers the "lonesomest time" of her life (The Bluest Eye, p. 117). To escape this loneliness, she finds leisure in different type of mirror. The screen of the picture show becomes her magic looking-glass "The onliest time," Pauline tells us, "I be happy seem like when I was in the picture show [...] The screen would light up, and I'd move right in on them pictures" (P. 123). Pauline's fatal dysfunction lies in turning herself into a mere reflection of the mirror. However, Pauline never sees a reflection of herself, but of a blond, blue-eyed feminine image that is impossible to emulate. The cultural production of gender has always thrived to treat women as visual objects. However, when the cultural production of gender makes the woman treat herself as a sight, "the cultural production of race makes the black woman unsightly" (Grewal 30). Thus, Pauline develops a notion of herself that exists only in the image reflected by her mirror, for mirrors "could not tell a lie" (Tatar 86) and so she builds her life around this reflected image.



Pauline's experience in the movie house signifies a process of assimilation into the white culture "I'd move right in on them pictures" (P.123). Andrea O'Reilly states that, in the movie theatre, Pauline "takes on the subject position constructed by the film, and reads her own life from the perspective of that film narrative" (50). The construction of her life leaves a mark instantly " [Those] pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard" (P.123). Everything that happens to Pauline, from this point of her life onward, makes coming home even harder. For in the darkness of the movie theatre, the narrator tells us, "Pauline is introduced to probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought-romantic love and physical beauty. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity and ended in disillusion" (P. 122). In a society obsessed with images, the black female characters in Morrison's novel exist merely as distorted images reflected by the Other "sealed into that crushing objecthood," as Frantz Fanon notes regarding blackness. The female characters in The Bluest Eye find themselves "fixed" through "the attitudes, the glances, of the other" (Fanon 109,111). Unable to overcome this fixity, Pauline's identity fissures and she collects "self contempt by the heap" (The Bluest Eye, p. 122).

Soon, Pauline starts equating physical beauty with virtue. The narrator tells us that after this education, Pauline "was never able to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty" (p. 122). Unfortunately, Pauline owns only the scale she absorbs fully from the silver screen and ultimately, her blackness makes her the antithesis of the ideal. A look in the mirror confirms her dissimilarity and therefore: ugliness. The culture she inhales from the movie house does not belong to her, yet she embraces it because it is everywhere; "every billboard, magazine, and book, made her settle to just being ugly" (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 123).

It can be argued that the supremacist white society is to be blamed for this twist in Pauline's psyche. Her terrible experience at the hospital and her conjuring a "mind's eye" (P.125) of her daughter from the picture show contribute to Pauline's feelings towards her daughter "Lord she was ugly" (P. 126). So, when her child is born "and it is both black and female, Pauline sees it as she herself was seen while in labor, as undesirable, irrelevant, and unimportant" (O'Reilly 53). Upon seeing herself as unwanted and disposable, she herself becomes the mirror to her child and reflects the degrading "outlawed gaze" onto her. Therefore, Pauline becomes, as George Yancy states, an "artist's



representation [...] a mere copy of a copy" (130). The artist, however, can be seen as the white society reproducing its subjects as impeccably beautiful, brushing away any imperfections the real object might project. Pauline does not imitate the real thing with all its imperfections; rather, she imitates the reproduction, which is unrealistically beautiful, and sees it as what reality should be. In this sense, Pauline becomes a victimizer of her children instead of just being the victim.

After her full internalization of the white culture's doctrines, Pauline undergoes a complete transformation. Her long-lived longing for beauty is found in the Fishers' family house, a white family's house where she works as a servant. After having settled on being ugly, Pauline embraces her role as the Fishers' servant. As their servant, she is able to enjoy "power, praise and luxury" in a way she cannot as the wife of Cholly Breedlove "the creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her when she spoke of the Fishers" (*The Bluest Eye*, p.128). As "Polly," whom the Fishers call her, she gets as close as a black woman can to experiencing the privileges of human dignity. Embodying the role of Polly becomes a substitute for what Pauline wants: a satisfying and substantial self. When she cannot access that self on her own, through her family or the black community, she accepts the self the Fishers impose upon her.

In the earliest versions of the fairy tale of Snow White, it is Snow White's natural mother, whose jealousy takes a murderous bent. The death of the queen, the "good mother," was a plot twist introduced by the Grimm Brothers (Windling 1). As a servant, Pauline turns into this wicked mother to Pecola. She creates a realm for her own self in fear of being defiled by any member of her own society, even her offspring. Her strong desire for power provokes mixed emotions of anger and fear that attend her realization of a possible loss. So, when her daughter accidentally pours the blueberry cobbler, her fanatic reaction is expected "my floor, my floor [...] my floor" (The Bluest Eye, p. 109). And, while scolding her own biological daughter with words "hotter and darker than the smoking berries" (P. 109), she lavishes motherly love on the upset "pink and yellow" Fisher girl. Susan Willis contends that Pauline "internalizes her hate for white society and deflects the spontaneous eruption of violence away from its real object and toward a piece of herself" (60). Thus, Pauline is caught in an ambiguous



relationship to this innocent girl who is her daughter and her enemy, her self and her opposite. She becomes like the fair Queen who directs her anger towards the little girl instead of the mirror. In this sense, the white family as the magic mirror serves as a "symbolic representation" of Pauline's "insecurity, solipsism, and growing madness" (Windling 2).

As she moves into those "pictures" in the movie house, Pauline immerses herself in her employer's house and denies her own family. In Pauline's eyes, the Fisher girl represents the beautiful daughter she always wanted, and it is she who receives Pauline's motherly love that rightly belongs to Pecola. Rather than trying to fix the imperfection by attempting to bring home some of the order and control she finds at work, Pauline puts energy into a world that is not really hers. She carries out her duty to support her children, but she does not look at them as a source of happiness. Home, for Pauline, becomes equivalent to darkness, and her husband and children become "the after thoughts one has just before sleep, the dark edges" that make the daily life with the Fishers "lighter, more delicate, more lovely" (P.127). Through her, fractured self, Pauline beats into her daughter "fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life" (P. 128).

Pauline is split into two different characters at this point of her life: the mother of two children and the "ideal servant" to a white family. Instead of exercising her natural love and power as a mother, Pauline loves the power endowed to her as a servant. Pauline does not discard the abnormal feelings of motherly love toward her surrogate white family, and fails to direct this love towards her biological black family, as she should. Instead, she drowns herself in that "lighter, more delicate, more lovely" servitude. Philip Page comments on what he calls the "attempted fusion" of Pauline with the white values, explaining that her total identification with the Fishers is a mere cover, a mask

that merely patches over her deep internal fragmentation and prevents her from further working on and through the identity forming process. Therefore, her self is dangerously divided [...] Her process of fusion and fragmentation is arrested, since she can never be a true part of the white world and she has renounced affiliation with the black one. She is split away from the latter, unable to fuse with the former, and unwilling to look for opportunities in the space between them. (47)

Page's account of Pauline's fragmentation recalls W.E.B. DuBois' well-known description of what he calls the "double-consciousness" of



African Americans, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (qtd. in Bouson 14). As Page tells us, Pauline does not belong to any of the two realms. She wanders around between the two worlds unable to compromise and look for a proper place in the "space" between them. Instead, she is content to live on the borders of a place she will never penetrate. However, this unreal world she creates to escape her harsh reality makes one wonder about such fragmentation: Who is to be blamed for this split; is it the imposed white values or Pauline's self-imposed alienation? Is it Pauline's artistic sensibilities "she has the soul of a poet and the eye of an artist" (O'Reilly 50) that make her vulnerable to the white ideals of beauty, or is it the continuous and unrelenting stress on whiteness that led to her fragmentation?

In her afterword to the novel, Morrison tells her readers that what she sought in her novel is not mere pitying but rather "an interrogation" of the self for what she calls "the smashing" of delicate and vulnerable creatures, as Pauline and her daughter are. To Morrison, both the white society for its "dismissive" 'othering' of people", and the black community for its inexplicable submissiveness are to be blamed for the smashing of the most delicate and vulnerable creatures, the females in a society (*Playing in the Dark* x).

The novel's concern with the "dismissive othering of people" is vivid and clear in the white society's creation of the normative discourse of female beauty. Pauline's identification with such discourses cripples her from absorbing her heritage as a black woman and disables her natural abilities as a mother. O'Reilly describes Pauline's fight against the white society as a willed "migration and assimilation" (58). She lives as an unidentified immigrant within the white household, as an escapee from her black family, and assimilates into this white household, melting every "funk" feeling and thought into the pot of the white society, just as she melts berries in the Fisher's pot. Pauline's nostalgia for a fairytale world is never fulfilled, partly because she cannot accept the fact that life is all about binaries. For Pauline, the miseries and joys of life cannot exist separately in one person, either suffering or living a life of eternal happiness.

In her chosen "migration and assimilation," Pauline becomes "the author of her own narrative of self-hatred, child abuse, and marital violence" (Fultz 54). In this way, Fultz projects Pauline as in charge of



her own life. Her flight to the north with her husband, her artistic sensibilities and the white discourses of beauty are factors that could have been overcome. Under this light, Pauline is perhaps the victimizer instead of being the victim. Her passivity lies in seeing the happy times of the past as "irrevocable," in settling down to being "ugly," and directing such feelings of passivity and self-loathing towards her children. She had her own happy times in the south with her parents, as well as in the beginning of her life with her husband Cholly, buy she cannot make her children feel half the happiness she had as a child and young adult. Not only does she settle down to her miseries but she instills her own malfunctions in her children, defying the myth of unconditional maternal love. Pauline's maternal love emigrates from its rightful home, that is, her biological children, and assimilates into the Fishers' child. Just like the Queen in the fairy tale, she succumbs to the voice in the mirror and seeks to destroy her own children, spiritually if not physically.

Jane Furman describes Morrison's writing as containing "no easy villains to hate" (189). Indeed, Pauline plays a major role in the downfall of her daughter but, as discussed above, she has been partially a victim herself as well. Furman argues that Morrison does not resort to "comfortable binary oppositions of good and evil, feminine and masculine"; rather, she sensitively treats "the complex emotions that determine character, male and female" (Ibid). Pauline subjugates her children because she is subjugated herself.

In directing her own self-loathing towards her children, especially towards Pecola, Pauline survives and gains the power she is deprived of by white women, white children, and white and black men alike. This leaves the children, female children in particular, since males can always flee their physical surroundings, as pure victims. Thus, the mother eventually destroys her own daughter, whose victimization is a bold symbol of her own despair and frustration. The wicked Queen in the fairy tale seeks only one way to be the "the fairest of all," which is the elimination of Snow White. Likewise, Pauline sees only one fantasy world that would exclude her daughter, for Pecola reminds her of all that she detests in herself. Certainly Pauline's experience provides a foil for her daughter's and prefigures her plight for the bluest eyes.

In her article (1985), Madonne Miner considers *The Bluest Eye* as a modern reworking of the myth of Persephone and Demeter. When Persephone is abducted by Pluto, Demeter, in an act of revenge,



withholds the coming of spring. As a compromise, Persephone spends half of the year with her mother, while the earth sprouts fruits and flowers, and the other half in the underworld with Pluto, while the earth is barren. The myth is referenced to underscore Pecola's motherlessness: Pecola, in contrast to Persephone, has no mother to protect her and thus is rendered vulnerable to the racist patriarchal world that eventually destroys her (177). As a result, Pecola becomes the withered seed that is never nurtured to flower. Unlike her mother, Pecola is forced to opt for a life of her own erasure and annihilation.

While Persephone is in the underworld, Homer tells us that "The soil did not yield single seed. Demeter kept them all underworld" (qtd. in Miner: 182). Evocatively, The Bluest Eye begins in autumn and it opens, "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941," disclosing the secret of a young African American girl named Pecola Breedlove. As a young girl, Claudia, who narrates the story, blames herself for the seeds that did not grow. However, Claudia tells us that "our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody's did [...] It had never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding" (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 5). The seed can be read as representing Pecola. The child did not grow and develop because the earth did not hold and nourish her. Pecola withers and her life does change in painful, devastating ways until she dies.

One of the most revealing moments in the novel occurs early when Pecola confronts her image in the mirror, a "speculum" of the multiple images of her short, tormented life (Fultz 56). This moment marks a complex consideration of an identity fractured into the multiple self-images Pecola has internalized through the gazes of others "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised" (The Bluest Eye, p. 45). Pecola's refracted image as an ugly and despised child is contrasted with her final dialogue with the mirror:

My eyes, My blue eyes
They are the prettiest I ever seen
Prettier than the sky?
Oh, yes. And bluer too. (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 201)

What the mirror reflects for Pecola is a social mask, a mask that she has always desired. When confronted everywhere with assertions of her worthlessness, Pecola creates her own world of acceptance inside the imagined blueness of her eyes. Like Narcissus, she approves of the



shadow of the reflected form that has nothing of its own, and in a desperate wish to undo the spell of blackness, Pecola resides in the mirror her own mind. By doing so, she becomes part of the mirror, a fractured piece of the mirror.

Pecola Breedlove is fractured by her yearning for blue eyes. Every single night in her family's storefront house, little Pecola relentlessly prays for the blue eyes of a little white girl, "For a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time" (P. 46). In her Afterword, Morrison notes that Pecola's pathological desire stems from implicit "racial self-loathing." She further describes this 'racial self-loathing' as an education and wonders how "the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female" learns it (210).

Morrison tells us that the novel "pecks away at the gaze that condemned" Pecola. By setting black Pecola in front of a "condemned gaze," Morrison shows the "insignificant destruction of a black girl" in a manner reminiscent of the fairy tale's Queen in front of the mirror's gaze ("Afterword" 213). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the talking mirror represents nothing but the male's view of what women should look like (38). Accordingly, Morrison's "outside gaze" can be seen as the mirror that murders Pecola, just as it murdered the fairytale queen. But, what are the horrors the mirror/gaze tells this poor little black female and splinters her into pieces? Morrison artfully magnifies this gaze from a simple patriarchal one to a complicated chauvinistic look that encompasses black and white, male and female as accomplices in the total destruction of her heroine.

The Bluest Eye holds at its centre a critique of Western beauty and its special destructiveness when imposed upon people of color. The destructiveness of this gaze reaches its climax when imposed on the female sex. However, Page sees Pecola as the "most completely split character" in the novel. To him, she is not only divided from the social and natural world around her but ultimately divided between her two selves: "her communal isolation parallels her internal fragmentation" (49). Pecola reaches this position through a series of steps that dismantle her and lead her to madness.

As the novel opens, we understand that Pecola's sad situation is compounded by a crushing sense of inferiority and ugliness inherited from her family and their own struggle with "the gaze of the mirror"



that reflects a false self-image. In a provocative passage, the narrator tells us of the Breedloves:

You looked at them and wondered why they were ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. 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 billboard, every movie, every glance [...] And they look the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 39)

It is this "all-knowing master," supported by every "glance" of billboards, movies, and people, that devalues them, that deems, unjustifiably, "so small a weight on the beauty scale" ("Afterword" 210).

Pecola's parents' lack of stable identities and their physical and psychological destruction drive her away from meaningful familial relationships. These factors, added to her own tendency toward "passive flight" (Page 49) lead her to withdraw, to escape her existence. During her parents' fights, Pecola "covers herself with the quilt" and whispers to herself, "please make me disappear," but Pecola "could never get her eyes to disappear" (P. 45). And from here, she gets the urge to ask for the "bluest eye of all":

It had occurred to Pecola that 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 [...] 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. (P. 46)

It is all about the eyes to little Pecola. She reckons only blue eyes will change her surroundings. Thus, Pecola "would only see what there was to see: the eyes of other people;" and ultimately, "would never know her beauty" (P. 47).



In "Tracking the Look in the Novels of Toni Morrison" (2000), Ed Guerrero explains how Morrison explores the complexity of the look as the controlling gaze of a dominant, racially oppressive society that constructs whiteness as the norm, while viewing African Americans as the "Other." He argues that Pecola has internalized this white and male gaze and constructed herself according to the rules of this Master (28). Everything in the society where she lives reminds her that she does not belong, or rather, that she does not exist. In limiting herself to a mere "sight," Pecola is torn between two self-negating extremes: "the unattainable model of white femininity and projections of her own existence in the eyes of the white characters with whom she to deal" (Harding and Martin 43).

The unattainable model of white femininity is singled out by Morrison in the figure of Shirley Temple, a white child actress, as a dominant icon of the white consumer culture. At the MacTeers' house, where Pecola is to live temporarily, she is faced with the mesmerizing power of whiteness when Frieda, Claudia's older sister, brings some crackers and 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 cute Shirley Temple was" (P. 19). Being cloaked in ugliness, as is said throughout the novel, not only does Pecola enjoy some milk out of a Shirley temple cup, but continues to drink the family's entire supply of milk. It is not just the snow-whiteness of Shirley Temple against her blackness that pains her; it is also the white substance inside the cup. "Milk is symbolic of whiteness," George Yancy observes, arguing that Pecola's over-consumption of milk stems from her need to become white through the very act of drinking milk. It is certainly the power in the whiteness of the milk that Pecola lacks and thus seeks. Perhaps, the "metamorphosis, whiteness in the milk will create a transubstantiation," changing her from "black to white, from absent to present, from nothing to something" (Yancy 128). To drink the white milk is to drink in the American whiteness and sense of belonging she lacks, for Pecola always understood that to be an acceptable part of the nation, to belong, is to be white.

Pecola's conviction that only the miracle of having blue eyes can relieve her pain prevents her from knowing her own beauty. She sees only what there is to see "the eyes of other people." The power of the beauty myth overwhelms Pecola that the innocent act of buying candies transforms into yet another chance of self-resentment. On her way to



the candy store, the little girl is so excited, everything on the way looks pretty to her virgin eyes. The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole become part of the "loved images." She thinks of them as beautiful and wonders on why they are called weeds. Such a joyful relationship between Pecola and the weeds, the viewer and the viewed is shortlived. When she steps into Mr. Yacobowski's candy store and comes under his blue eyes, her existence is doubted, as he does not see her:

Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance. He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. (P. 48)

The whole world of Pecola collapses here, for she sets the gazes of other people as her mirror and the mirror tells her that she is not worth seeing. Male violation of female femininity takes the picture of denying her presence. Pecola finds her ugliness confirmed in Mr. Yacobowski's white gaze. Charles Cooley, a social psychologist, states that Mr. Yacobowski (who is said to have blue eyes) is the "looking glass" through which Pecola sees her ugliness confirmed (qtd. in Yancy: 128). She decides that his distaste must be for her blackness, and "it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes" (The Bluest Eye, p. 49). Pecola senses "the glazed separateness," and her world becomes as separated to her (P. 48). Walking home, she rejects the dandelions she formerly saw as beautiful. They, like Pecola herself, will never satisfy the standards of the male gaze that rejects her and so she rejects them as her own self: "Dandelions. A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, "They are ugly. They are weeds" (P. 50).

Before her contact with a white male, Pecola has a chance of asserting her self-worth, but after being under the gaze of Mr. Yacobowski's blue eyes, she only finds joy in her Mary Jane candy:

Each pale yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane, for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face. Blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (P. 50)



In a story as old as Adam and Eve, Mary Jane becomes the sinful apple. The consumption of the candy by Pecola seems to mirror her own desire to consume the white girl on the wrapper, to take Mary Jane's very essence into herself. Like the whiteness of the milk, the piece of candy is believed to have the power to effect a "genuine state of ontological alterity, changing Pecola from black to white, from a state of fecal dirtiness to clean comfort" (Yancy 129). Something as benign as a candy wrapper becomes the site of a hegemonic idea holding white power, transforming little Pecola, who identifies formerly with dandelions, into a black girl dreaming to be the blonde, blue eyed Mary Jane.

The ultimate rejection Pecola receives is from her own community. At school, the boys dance a "macabre ballet," singing "Black e mo. Black e mo" (P. 65). Of this song, Morrison says that the black boys had "extemporized a verse" made of an insult about "matters over which the victim had no control," making her the scapegoat for their own humiliation and pain. The relationship is a vampiric one, and the fact that "it was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth" makes the scene even more tragic:

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 courage, consuming whatever was in its path. (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 65)

Pecola is that looking glass that reminds them of their ugliness. They feel obliged to perform this ritual in order to exorcise the demons of blackness from themselves. They cannot avenge themselves, like the Queen, by killing who they think is more beautiful, so they direct it toward the most vulnerable member of the society: a child, a female: "they danced a macabre ballet around the victim, whom for their own sake, they were prepared to sacrifice to the flaming pit" (p. 65). They have to sacrifice someone to gain the approval of the "all-knowing master" who has deemed them ugly. However, by ostracizing Pecola for her blackness, the boys not only please the master, but "censure their own cultural identities" (Cormier-Hamilton 109).

The boys could not have found an easier victim. Pecola responds to her captivity with tears rather than insults because, like her mother,



she has gone under what Abdellatif Khayati calls severe "cultural assimilation," through school primers, movies, and almost every other cultural item from cups to candies. Under this "violence of Sameness", Pecola is trapped in her own skin and simply cannot defend herself against this pressure (Khayati 313). Black people are denied proud identification, which is essential for the growth of nations. This makes the white ideals of beauty the only pure villain in the novel.

If Gilbert and Gubar find that all the women in the fairytale are fixed by an exclusively patriarchal judgment, this is not the case in The Bluest Eye. While Denise Heinze argues that Pecola's image of herself is refracted through a "decidedly male point of view [...] in which the appropriating gaze of the subject is male and the object of the gaze is female" (25), it can be argued that this reading is unsatisfactory because it fails to account for the female gaze's complicity in objectifying little Pecola. Placed at the bottom of a color-based hierarchy, Pecola has fallen victim to other victimized black women who see in her their deficiencies. One of the most terrible rejections occur when a young boy makes her the scapegoat for his own pain, which stems directly from the fact that his mother, embracing white middleclass standards, forces him to reject his own blackness as she invests her affection in her cat. This woman is Geraldine, one of those whom Morrison describes as the "brown girls" (P. 82). By straightening their hair, clothe pinning their noses and suppressing "the dreadful funkiness of passion" (p.83), these brown women have swept away their identities with the poisonous comb of self-loathing. Louis Junior, Geraldine's only son, knew from the earliest days of his life that he belongs to the colored race "Colored people_were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (P. 87).

It is not surprising, then, that Louis perceives Pecola as "ugly." When he bullies her to come to his house, Pecola agrees out of desperation for any kind of human recognition. Frustrated by his mother's deep affection for her cat, Louis uses Pecola as a scapegoat and accuses her of killing the beloved cat. However, Geraldine's strong reaction against Pecola goes far deeper than her cat's death. Pecola's blackness reminds her of a reality she has denied for a long time. She looks at Pecola as though at a mirror, a rather "symbolic configuration" (Miner 185), a composite of all the negative traits Geraldine associates with blackness, "everything ugly, dirty and degrading" (The Bluest Eye, p.23). Geraldine cannot allow herself to see Pecola for what she really



is; to do so would be to acknowledge kinship with her. Thus, Pecola is carefully taught that there is no one to love her, that whites do not see her, that blacks scorn her. Her unarticulated desire is mirrored by Geraldine's suffering to get rid of blackness. However, Pecola leaves with an unforgettable image of "the blue eyes of the black face" of Geraldine's cat (P. 90). She is more than mesmerized by the blue eyes on the black face. She sees in them the fulfillment of her wish.

The Bluest Eye presents the emotional consequences of identifying ugliness with blackness. According to Page, the novel delineates the divisions within the African American culture and the effect of such divisions as the black culture responds to the "unyielding pressures of subjugation" (52). The social hierarchy that constitutes the female gender as portrayed in the novel is based on their approximation to white standards of beauty, behavior and wealth. Pecola easily occupies the bottom of this pyramid for her dark skin, but Maureen Peal, "a high yellow dream child" proudly occupies the top of this color-based hierarchy. Claudia tells us that the school is enchanted by this light-skinned child. Teachers "smiled encouragingly" when they call on her, "black boys did not trip her in the halls" as they do with the other girls, "white boys didn't stone her," and black girls "stepped aside," out of respect, when she passes, not out of contempt, as they do with Pecola (The Bluest Eye, p.62).

When the black boys perform their ritual on Pecola, Claudia and Frieda try to help her, but it is Maureen, the green-eyed, rich girl with the long brown hair, "braided into two lynch ropes" that intimidates them and makes them stop their ritual (P. 62). However, her kindness to Pecola is short-lived. We notice how she runs to the other side of the street screaming at Claudia, Frieda and Pecola, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute" (P. 73). The MacTeer sisters stand aghast in front of Maureen's insults, but what antagonizes them is Pecola's pain "she seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing" (Ibid). She has heard and seen her ugliness all her life, but after Maureen's words, Pecola holds in the misery "where it could lap up into her eyes" (P. 74). Maureen's whiteness, and hence her beauty and rank are unattainable for Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, but they, nonetheless, see its power. Pecola's wish for blue eyes presents a pathological extreme of the desire to share that power. The wish for power provokes Pecola to imagine that if she had blue eyes, people would not do bad things in front of her, and Maureen's charmed life seems to support this idea. Clearly, Maureen sees herself as superior because she looks more



like her oppressors, the white people (Bloom 156). Pecola, then, becomes trapped in the blue eyes, white skin of all the Maureen Peals, Shirley Temple and Mary Janes of the world. Morrison describes Pecola as a "total and complete victim," but she is a victim not only of racial segregation but also of her "crippled and crippling family" (Stepto 17, "Afterword" 210).

Convinced that the world sees her as a physical object, Pecola feels unworthy. However, the community's refusal to "see" her is not new to her. Early in the novel, the sensitive Pecola asks the MacTeer sisters in a juvenile manner, "How do you get somebody to love you?" (P. 32). The sisters cannot relate to her question because they are granted the most natural type of affection, parental love. Sadly, Pecola is not. Deemed "ugly" by the very gaze of her own mother, Pecola cannot feel anything other than ugliness. Forces like the outer white society, her own black community and finally her own home, then, conjoin in the conspiracy of ruining Pecola. Poor Pecola finds no place to escape. One prominent incident that instigates Pecola's self-loathing and conviction of her own ugliness is the kitchen scene. However, its implications for Pecola are much more severe than those for the mother. When Pecola accidentally spills the berry cobbler Mrs. Breedlove is preparing for her employer's family, the outrage is unbearable; the rejection is total and the words almost hysterical:

Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly [...] 'Crazy fool [...] my floor, mess [...] look what you [...] get on out [...] now that [...] crazy [...] my floor, my floor, my floor.' Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries. (*The Bluest Eye*, p.109)

Once more, Pecola is rejected.

It is usually normal, however, for a child to be scolded by his or her parent. But what really instigates the ugliness in Pecola is the displacement of affection; in addition to, the total disregard of her presence. Pecola watches painfully outside the white house, her own mother soothing the "little pink and yellow girl" (P. 109). She watches, as though into a mirror, her Mrs. Breedlove becoming Polly to the white girl. Pecola watches her mother negating her own daughter by neglecting to answer the Fishers' girl on Pecola's identity. Michael Awkward points out that Pauline's negation of her daughter represents her "refusal to share with the white girl Pecola's identity" (86), out of



shame and fear of being identified with Pecola. The beery cobbler scene affects Pecola tremendously and, as Page suggests, is a marker of the "emotional death of Pecola" (39). Desperate for love, Pecola immerses her identity into the white and yellow Fisher girl.

While the Queen in the fairytale derives her power from her beauty, Pauline derives her power from the cleanliness and order of the Fishers' house. The Queen's beauty, as the tale implies, provides her place in the castle's hierarchy, and in order to maintain this hierarchy, she has to dispose of Snow White. Mrs. Breedlove, too, dismisses Pecola because she sees her as a threat to her own castle, which is the impeccable, white Fishers' kitchen. Michael Awkward explains that the fear and shame Pecola represents to her mother "can lead to the sacrifice of the black offspring, to parental detachment from the child, and to complete adoption of white standards" (86). In this case, white standards are objectifying black femininity. It is a relation of power, more or less, and in both cases the patriarchal mirror is the sole victor.

Just as Snow White serves as a mirror—a reversed mirror of the Queen, reflecting all she is not —the little Fisher girl also serves as a reversed mirror to her maid, Polly. The difference is that while the queen seeks the death of Snow White, Pauline directs her anger towards Pecola, the one representing all she is. From here stems Pecola's wish to disappear: "Please, God [...] please make me disappear." Every part of her body did disappear. "Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left"(P. 45). Pecola undergoes what Miner calls "visual distortion" (P. 185). The way she looks at herself is distorted by the gazes of the people around her, so she withers, though she is not yet defeated. Pecola's attempt to bodily disappear can be seen as a beginning to her depersonalization process.

The Bluest Eye suggests that the white patriarchal gaze is what destroys Pecola Breedlove. However, the nature of her father's existence is a very controversial matter and stands out as the core of the novel, the focal point that actually places Pecola amongst the pariah and the insane. If we are to connect this to the fairy tale, we find that Snow White's father, the king, is notable only by his absence, his apparent indifference, and his failure to protect his own child. Angela Carter points out that the king in Snow White is also "the unmoved mover, the unseen organizing principle. Without the absent father, there would have been no story because there would have been no conflict" (qtd. in Windling: 14). In The Bluest Eye, the case is slightly



different. While the king cannot save his daughter from the wickedness of his wife, Pecola's father is an accomplice in the great crime against his daughter. His complicity, however, does not lie in neglecting her; it goes further than that. Pecola, who feels that she is unlovable, craves the affection of her father, only to be raped by him.

The Bluest Eye depicts the progressive victimization of Pecola, who is rejected and physically abused by her mother, sexually abused by her alcoholic and unpredictably violent father, and ultimately scapegoated by members of the community. However, it is the incestuous rape and resultant pregnancy that makes her an alien to her surroundings. Losing the security and protection her house should provide, Pecola becomes a refugee from home. Because incest is "always, inevitably destructive to the child," the "damage done" to Pecola is "total" (Herman 4). Accordingly, she steps "over into madness" (The Bluest Eye, pp. 204-206). Pecola ends up looking at the mirror for eternity, conversing with her alternate identity in the mirror, her only friend.

"Concealed, veiled, eclipsed," Pecola hides behind a chosen "mantle" of ugliness "peeping out from behind the shroud very seldom, and then only to yearn for the return of her mask" (P. 39). This recalls Snow White's placement in her glass coffin, dead and displayed to the patriarchal gaze of judgment. However, while the Prince rescues Snow White with his love, Pecola, who is called once, by Morrison, "the dead girl," (qtd. in Gwin: 56) is granted another kind of love. When Cholly sees Pecola with her "hunched" back and her head turned to one side "as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow," he feels an emotional sequence of "revulsion, guilt, pity, then love," and he asks himself, "What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? Clearly accused by her "clear statement of misery, all he wants is to break her neck-but tenderly' (P. 161). His touch of love is fatal, but Cholly's "embrace, the rape," in Morrison's words, "is all the gift he has left" (Tate 164). To the readers' shock, Morrison also describes the rape as "almost irrelevant," insisting that Cholly "looked" at his daughter with love, and the rape is but a symbol of his "powerlessness to help her pain" (Tate 164). On pondering upon the last scene of Pecola "among all the waste and beauty of the world," Claudia affirms that Cholly was the one who "loved her enough to touch her, envelop her, give something of himself to her" (Pp. 205-6).



J. Brooks Bouson argues that Cholly does to Pecola what has been done to him over the years and thus, "he inflicts on her his own feelings of exposure, powerlessness, narcissistic injury, and humiliation" (43). Terry Otten has a similar view arguing that the rape is nothing but "an exercise of power and freedom, a protest against an unjust and repressive culture" (21). Raped by her father, beaten by her mother, Pecola as a daughter becomes a "text of gender relations so thickly complicated by race and class as to become almost indecipherable" (Gwin 82). Gwin sees father and daughter as both victims of the "whiteness that encircles them both," accusing a bigger perpetrator "In this sense whiteness becomes the abusive father" (78). The line between the victim and the villain is blurry in the novel. However, the line that connects all the victims and villains in the novel is white hegemony, which makes it the sole victimizer.

Having been racially rejected and victimized, Pecola seeks help from Soaphead Church, a molester who advertises himself as a spiritualist, to grant her the bluest eyes of all. He sees her plight as "the most fantastic and the most logical petition" he has ever received, and he wants the power to help "the ugly little girl asking for beauty" and desiring to "rise up out of the pit of her blackness" (P. 174). He promises to fulfill her wish and "no one will see her blue eyes. But she will" (P. 182). When the reader encounters Pecola again, she is happily engaged in a lively conversation with the mirror:

Can you imagine? Something like that happening to a person, and nobody but nobody saying anything about it? They all try to pretend they don't see them [...] Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced [...] They are bluer, aren't they? Oh, Yes. Much bluer.

(The Bluest Eye, pp. 195-197)

Absented and silenced, Pecola finds her voice in madness. Pecola herself becomes those beautiful bluest eyes, which gaze without blinking at the mirror, only to mirror her "father's own unseeing" (Gwin 82). Finally, the physical transformation she has always longed for is achieved but only through what Yancy calls a "process of psychological transmogrification" (135). The negation of her presence from her family, community and the whole world is too much for her fragile psyche to endure. The tremendous power of whiteness transmogrifies her into a freak, a black face with blue eyes. At the end, Pecola



becomes like a bird longing to fly high and cloak itself with the blueness of the sky, "beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind" (P. 204).

Like the marigolds that do not grow, Pecola is lost to the world, trapped between madness and sanity, unable to be anything but broken. Pecola, who absorbs the waste others dump on her only to find herself in a "complex ritual of scapegoating" (Awkward 101), is unable to flee:

All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us [...] Even her waking dreams we use —to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of her strength. (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 205)

This passage, so charged with pain and wonder, makes the conclusion of the novel. However, instead of learning a lesson, some critics engage themselves in this ritual scapegoating. Otten contends that while the defeated and ultimately mad Pecola is "someone to be pitied," her "ignorance" and "passivity" deserve the reader's "contempt" (24). Critics note that by not rejecting the process of identity erasure imposed on her, Pecola is responsible for her own silence (Samules and Hudson-Weems 15). However, Jane Kuens has claimed that to read *The Bluest Eye* "looking to assign blame" is to "miss the point" (421), contending that the main purpose of writing the novel is to demonstrate "the void that is Pecola's 'unbeing'" ("Afterward" 215).

Fultz invites readers to consider the fact that Pecola alone tried to remedy her situation a number of times. She further notes that if these situations are to be considered, we might be "less inclined to pity her and more inclined to admire her" (56). Her long hours before the mirror in a futile attempt to discover the secret of the ugliness unjustly ascribed to her, "the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 45), can be seen as an attempt to find a self. Her very act of requesting blue eyes from the spiritualist shows a girl prepared and capable of doing what it takes to fit in with a community.



Had Pecola cultivated her initial recognition of beauty in herself, she would have known that she alone owns herself. Harding and Martin argue that Pecola's initial affection for the dandelions that people generally despise, and her subsequent acceptance of general opinion, "mirror the fluctuation in the self-hatred that she accepts on account of her color" (26). Similarly, Leester Thomas notes that if only Pecola had been taught to love herself, she would have survived the community's distortion. If she had applied some of the intuitive anger she felt, she would have "annihilated" some of those who deemed her unsightly and this "would have assuaged some of her pain" (53). To Thomas, Pecola was "too anxious to assimilate," so that she forgot the beauty of the cracks within herself. Her desperation for love would not, or more likely, could not let her see herself, so "she hallucinates a self" ("Afterword" 215).

Pecola alone is not to be blamed for her own destruction. All that Pecola wants is to exorcise the curse of blackness the society and her own community threw on her. "No one is indicted for Pecola's destruction," remarks Demetrakopoulos, "but then in another way we all are" (32). Stepto remarks that Morrison herself seems to support this opinion, stating that the reason for Pecola's desire must be at least partially traced to the failures of Pecola's own community:

She wanted to have blue eyes and she wanted to be Shirley Temple [...] because of the society in which she lived and, very importantly, because of the black people who helped her want to be that. The responsibilities are ours. It's our responsibility for helping her believe, helping her come to the point where she wanted that. (Stepto 22)

However, Morrison also specifically warns "against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze" ("Afterward" 210) and how it smashes Pecola slowly into invisibility, "framed and reframed into categories of 'poor,' 'black,' 'ugly,' 'nasty' and so on [...] Pecola tries to make herself shrink into nothingness" (Gwin 79-80).

It is interesting, however, that Sammy, Pecola's brother, who faces the same blows as Pecola, heads outward. He flees his community and escapes it, looking for a better life while Pecola is held captive behind the three bars of gender, race and class. In "Female Aspiration is a Joke," Patricia Meyer Spacks notes that Pecola and other female



characters can only "marry in defeat or go mad in a complicated triumph" because they are doomed to failure" (158). Pecola's story does not end with a prince rescuing her from her crystal casket to live happily ever after with. By wishing to be in the white woman's shoes, pecola's story, like the Queen's, ends being burned by them. For Pecola, blue eyes are not enough; she is after the bluest eyes, as Morrison makes clear, at the very expense of sanity itself.

While Pecola's life is often described as tragic, some critics refuse to read The Bluest Eye as tragedy (Miner 26, Yancy 35). Their argument is based on the idea that Morrison does give a voice to her narrator, Claudia, a girl of the same age and color as Pecola. While Pecola's story is about defeat, Claudia's is about survival. However, What Morrison really gives us is not hope at the end of the story but rather a glimpse of hope.

Unlike Pecola, Claudia possesses the possibility of constructing her own self-definition and affecting the direction of her community. What Claudia owns is rage and strong sensitivity that enables her to create a proud self of her authentic identity. This is quite clear in the incident of Shirley Temple cup. Whereas Frieda and Pecola adore the white femininity of the white girl, Claudia feels only "unsullied hatred," not only for the white girl on the cup, but "for all the Shirley Temples of the world" (The Bluest Eye, p. 19). The iconic white female images imposed on Claudia by the Western culture touches her rebellious nerve. Unlike Pecola, Claudia rebels against the mirror that assigns her a secondary place on the scale of beauty.

Determined to defy this mythology, Claudia creates her own ritual acts against "the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen peals" (P. 190). Not only does she refuse to provide motherly love to the ragged blue-eyed baby dolls, but she performs voodoo like dismemberment of the porcelain dolls:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, 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.

(The Bluest Eye, p. 20)



This quotation recalls Pecola's long hours in front of the mirror, looking for what has made her ugly in the eyes of other people. Claudia, on the other hand, has the strength and authority to poke the glassy blue eyeballs of the white dolls, only to find "sawdust," nothingness. Her destructiveness comes from a curiosity to decipher the mystery of the lovability of these mythic images to other people. In her actions, Claudia refuses to be a marginal character, but only to be what Awkward calls a "questing marginal" (75) who seeks to understand the origin of the beauty myth. This is why she seeks to mine the doll's surface in a futile effort to find the secret and the magic behind its pink skin, blue eyes and the blond hair. It seems that the magic the "blue eyes" has on people escapes Claudia, and the fact that it is only Claudia is tragic (Awkward 75-9).

Pink skinned, blue eyed dolls are symbols to Claudia—symbols that imply her unattractiveness. The fact that she ought to lavish motherly love on a doll that looks nothing like her mother, the black girl does not arouse in Claudia affection but rather a sadistic confrontation that, later, transfers to "The truly horrifying thing":

... the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: the secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwww," but not for me? (P. 22)

Just as the African American community used Pecola as a ritual object in their ceremonies designed to appease the master and to exhibit their rejection of blackness, Claudia on the other hand, defies this master and uses the little white girls as her ritual object to prove to the master the "unreality or emptiness behind the façade of [the white] construction of femininity" (Munafo 8). To her, the dolls are only idealized replicas of white femininity, of these little white girls. Smartly, she wants to challenge the master by not rejecting these replicas but by questioning the false lovability behind the masks of whiteness exposing their sawdust. Unlike other characters' acts of splitting, Claudia splits things to "demystify" them (Page 57), to find theirs, and ultimately her own, essence.

Certainly, Claudia retains a sense of self affirmation not available to other characters in the novel. However, this self-affirmation is soon transferred into doubt. Claudia feels the "familiar violence" rise in her



when she meets the "high yellow dream child," Maureen Peal (Pp.108, 62). The "unearned haughtiness" in Maureen's eyes provokes Claudia at first. Maureen stands in sharp contrast to Pecola, Claudia and Frieda's blackness, but only Claudia questions this "unearned" lovability that is bestowed upon Maureen for something none of them has control over. Yet, Claudia is "secretly prepared" to be Maureen's friend (P. 63). When they share what seems the beginning of a friendship, things fall apart. Maureen voices the community's judgment on their black members by insisting that she is "cute" and that the girls are "black and ugly" (P. 73). However, this insult is first provoked by Claudia herself, who unconsciously tries to deny the stain of blackness "Black? Who you calling black?" (P. 73). Acknowledging the "wisdom, accuracy, and relevance" of Maureen's remarks, the insulted Claudia observes:

If she was cute, then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 74)

The defeated Claudia emerges to the fore. She still owns the intuitive nature and the inquisitive personality, but the world would not let her

We felt comfortable in our skins [...] and could not comprehend this unworthiness. Jealousy we understood and thought natural—a desire to have what somebody else had; but envy was a strange, new feeling for us. And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful and not us. (Ibid, p.74)

The Breedloves' "mysterious master" is a Thing to Claudia, yet powerful enough to shame her. True, she does not wear it as a cloak like the Breedloves, but it affects her so immensely that she jumps from "pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love" (P.23). Like the others, Claudia succumbs, rather reluctantly, to white hegemony. The same Claudia who one dissected baby dolls and wanted to axe little



white girls is ashamed of her "disinterested violence" and later learns how "repulsive" it was. The same Claudia who would like Pecola to assume a defiant posture "I wanted to open her up, crisp her edges [...] force her to stand erect and spit the misery on the street" now identifies with Pecola and surrenders to the shame that "flounders about for refuge" (Ibid). This recalls a striking resemblance to the fate of Snow White who, instead of smashing the crystal casket herself, actually "exchanges one glass coffin for another" (Gilbert 42); so does Claudia, who partially succumbs to a self-inflicted shame. Like Snow White, Claudia surrenders to her new situation and is forced to look at the mirror like all of the women in the novel.

Critical interpretations of Claudia have been as divided as her position against the construction of a stigmatized black identity. While some critics have remarked that Claudia's "aesthetics are her own," or that she is "the only really resistant voice" (Grewal 37, Yancy 35), others have commented on the ultimate loss of her initial resistant voice; "certainly Claudia, for all her adult retrospection, provides no empowerment" (Dittmar 142). The beauty myth imposed by white dominance is too strong to be conquered and even "Claudia, the strongest character in the book, cannot defy the myth" (Byerman 5). Labeled a "questing marginal," Claudia cannot defend her erasure (Awkward 75). Her achievements lie in her partial but ultimately unsuccessful understanding of the effects-of the white spell. Her words in the text prove the legitimacy of this statement: "I learned much later to worship her [Shirley Temple]" (P.23). However, it can be argued that if Claudia had given up her resistance and surrenders to racial dominance, her love of the white icons of beauty at the time would have been genuine, like that of Frieda's and Pecola's. However, her love is "fraudulent," as she describes it, and the transformation is a mere "adjustment without improvement" (P. 23). Many would argue that her adjustment is in itself an improvement to the white society, but the fact that Claudia understands it as an adjustment means that she still remembers her painful hate against the blue eyes and the pearly face but has learned not to experience it. Claudia's remark that she later learned "to worship Shirley Temple;" the word "learned" itself is irrefutable proof that hegemony is learned by children, not naturally developed in them.

Toni Morrison has given Claudia a voice—a rather amputated voice, but the seeds of survival wither in her futile attempts to revive them. In a last attempt to defy the sentiments for white baby dolls and to break



the spell thrown on her community, Claudia plants the marigold seeds in hope for Pecola's baby to live. When her magic fails, Claudia observes that the soil does not nurture "certain kinds of flowers" and vet, she criticizes her own community, herself included "When the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live" (P. 205). Khayati seems to approve this point, noting that the "insurgent need to counter the oppressive forces of assimilation is not only short-lived but is not extended to the rest of the community" (313), as evident in Pecola's case as well as her mother's. However, these readings tend to forget Claudia's subsequent words affirming her falsity, "We are wrong, of course" (The Bluest Eye, p. 205). Through Claudia's single narrative, Morrison has enabled her to resist the power of "white mythology," but this mythology is proved too powerful to be conquered. The fact that, at the end, she tells us that it is "much, much, much too late" to amend Pecola and her community "at least on the edge of [her] town" (P. 206), Claudia is giving us an implication that there might be a glimpse of hope, maybe not in her town, but surely in other towns, and other souls to be truly beautiful.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison works out the layers of woundedness, idealization and aggression that inscribe and re-inscribe the bodies of her heroines. Morrison exerts the power of the "Mirror" as she engages in the shaping of feminine silence at the novel's centre and its fissure. The splintered pieces of *The Bluest Eye* are "dismissed, trivialized, and misread" ("Afterword" 216) by the "horror at the heart" of their yearning (*The Bluest Eye*, p. 204). Pauline, Pecola and even Claudia are put to sleep in a crystal casket by the evil witch of race and gender oppression. Will they wait for a male prince to rescue them from their captivity, or will they be able to break the spell, remove the sinful apple and smash the crystal casket that entraps them? It seems that this is the question Morrison asks throughout the novel.

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