

# Unveiling Racial Beauty: The Beauty Myth in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to examine how beauty has been perceived as a societal construct through the lens of the white and black paradigms, as depicted in Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye*. It explores how this pursuit of the idolized beauty standard, perpetuated by mass media, blurs the lines of self-identity. This study investigates issues of discrimination and identity, examined through the solitary and tragic narrative of Pecola Breedlove, who, from a young age, longs for white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, thereby subjugating her life to the stereotypes of white supremacy. In light of the politics of racial beauty and identity, the text illustrates how racial discrimination fosters negative perceptions of self and race among Black individuals, driving a yearning to attain whiteness that ultimately contributes not only to their societal disintegration but may also lead to madness.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, beauty, myth, self-identity, racism, discrimination

*Галина Аврамова. РАЗБУЛВАНЕ НА РАСОВАТА КРАСОТА: МИТЪТ ЗА КРАСОТАТА В „НАЙ-СИНИТЕ ОЧИ“ НА ТОНИ МОРИСЪН*

**Резюме.** Тази статия цели да изследва начина, по който красотата се възприема като социален конструкт през призмата на бялата и черната парадигма, както е изобразено в романа на Тони Морисън „Най-сините очи“. Проучването разглежда как стремежът към идеализирания стандарт за красота, наложен от масовите медии, размазва границите на самоидентификацията. То навлиза в проблемите на дискриминацията и идентичността, анализирани чрез самотната и трагична съдба на Пи-

кола Брийдлав, която от ранна възраст копнее за бяла кожа, руса коса и сини очи, подчинявайки живота си на стереотипите на бялото превъзходство. В светлината на политиката на расовата красота и идентичност текстът илюстрира как расовата дискриминация подхранва негативните възприятия за себе си и расата сред чернокожите индивиди, водейки до желание за постигане на „бялост“, което в крайна сметка допринася не само за тяхната социална дезинтеграция, но може да доведе и до лудост.

**Ключови думи:** Тони Морисън, красота, мит, самоидентичност, расизъм, дискриминация

### *Research/Научно изследване*

Exploring the sense of self-identity as an essential part of racial beauty within the context of societal constructs sheds light on the profound impact on individual self-conception. Developing a sense of self is substantive to personal growth, based on factors such as gender, religion, race, and family. However, in the United States, many individuals tend to simplify racial identity by categorizing people into black and white, leading to the sustainment of beauty myths that can either inspire people to pursue an unattainable beauty ideal or cause harm and destroy them.

These myths, well-entrenched and firmly built into the structure of society, are vividly illustrated in Morrison's work, providing a compelling examination of racial discrimination and white supremacy. By studying *The Bluest Eye*, we look into the complexities of the beauty myth and its major impact on identity development.

Toni Morrison's novel tells the heartbreaking story of Pecola Breedlove, a solitary black girl who, obsessed by her longing for white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes, ultimately descends into madness. It also looks into the dynamic between her unraveling psyche and the endeavors of several other black characters to assimilate more fully into white society. In this context, this paper explores how the beauty myth, perpetuated by racial discrimination and white male dominance, blurs the quest for self-identity for both Pecola and the black community. Furthermore, it illustrates how racial discrimination fosters negative perceptions of self and race among black individuals, fostering a longing to attain whiteness. Prior to looking deeper into the text, it is essential to analyze the theme of beauty within the novel through the lens of racial beauty and identity politics.

The influence of the American paradigm of beauty is indeed too strong, and people of every race want to look like and become part of this American ideal. The main vehicle for its promotion is undoubtedly the mass media. More precisely, Hollywood and television are the two major forces affecting Americans' perception of beauty. Watching movies became a national hobby for Americans in the first half of the twentieth century, and in the dark theaters of cinemas, audiences watched, bewitched, as glamorous and beautiful actresses such as Bette Davis, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, and Shirley Temple illuminated the screen. In the

1950s, Hollywood depicted women as either sex symbols, perfect wives, or individuals overly focused on their physical appearance and attractiveness. No wonder that American women from the mid-twentieth century desired to have looks similar to female characters in the movies.

In the early period of Hollywood, as well as television, there were virtually no black actors or characters. Since white characters dominated the screen, black people did not have any black models to follow or compare to. Thus, they compared themselves to the white images they saw everywhere: on posters, in magazines, in movies, and on television. As black people were more or less “invisible” in the mass media, black was considered ugly, while white was beautiful. This disparity in perceptions leading to identity crises is the major theme of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*.

In her 1993 Afterword to *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison unequivocally links the theme of beauty in the novel to the dynamics of racial beauty and identity. She writes, “[T]he reclamation of racial beauty in the sixties stirred these thoughts [about beauty], made me think about the necessity for the claim. Why, although reviled by others, could this beauty not be taken for granted within the community?” (210). She adds, “The assertion of racial beauty [in the novel] was...against the damaging internalization of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (210). Rejecting the internalization of the (white) outside gaze was part of the project of the Black Arts Movement. During this movement, writers delineated the impact of the cultural colonization of the black community by Euro-American culture and values and actively pursued a black aesthetics.

The basic theme of Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* centers on African Americans’ conformity to white standards. The author lays the groundwork of the novel on matters of beauty in an attempt to awaken African Americans to the understanding that they are not obliged to adhere to white standards in any way. The novel’s major character, Pecola Breedlove, unquestioningly accepts the ideology that “white is beautiful.” Yet Morrison wrote this novel at the height of the “Black Is Beautiful” period, during which African Americans were being reconditioned to believe that their looks are synonymous with beauty.

In the story, the Breedloves think that the world views them as poor and ugly. They believe that they are hideous, comparing themselves to what they see in the American media, which always portrays whites as representations of what is beautiful. In her younger years, Pauline, Pecola’s mother, got her first glimpse into idealized beauty by going to the movies. She viewed the Hollywood blond-haired, blue-eyed actresses as representations of real loveliness. She thinks that anything that does not look like these bombshells, including her own, is not attractive.

Being a black girl in a society where white-skinned, blue-eyed beauties are idolized, Pecola perceives herself as ugly. Consumed by self-loathing, she stares at herself in the mirror, desperate to figure out where her ugliness comes from. The novel

suggests that Pecola's yearning for beauty stems from her feeling that people do not see her. During her walk to Mr. Yacobowski's candy store, she sees a clump of dandelions. Having perceived them, Pecola grants them a reality, integrating them into her world. However, when she enters Mr. Yacobowski's store and meets his indifferent gaze, her sense of existence, as well as the existence of her world, is called into question. The man fails to acknowledge her presence, seeing her and her world devoid of recognition—the glazed separateness. Walking home, Pecola transfers this rejection onto the once-beloved dandelions, viewing them as ugly now.

Experiencing a constant overwhelming feeling of misery and sadness due to her perceived ugliness, Pecola exerts to the heavenly help of prayers, which she performs regularly, asking God to provide her with white skin and, most of all, blue eyes. Pecola is convinced that this transformation would not only earn her the affection of her peers and educators but also reinforce her sense of self-value. Consequently, she embarks on a journey to acquire blue eyes, seeking out the assistance of Soaphead Church with the hope of realizing her wish. Tragically, Pecola's yearning becomes distorted by the duplicitous psychic healer, driving her into a state of madness as she convinces herself that she has achieved blue eyes. However, this deceptive fulfillment only serves to further isolate her from the black community. This illustrates the gravity of Pecola's predicament: in a society dictated by a hierarchy of skin colors, her blackness and perceived ugliness condemn her to a life of misery. Moreover, her pursuit of an unattainable ideal isolates her even further, leaving her perpetually suspended in a state of uncertainty, unsure of where she belongs.

According to Zangwill (2001:1), "Beauty does not stand alone. It cannot exist by itself. Things are beautiful because of the way they are in other respects. Beauty is a property that depends on other properties." What is important is the way people manipulate what is beautiful and how they absorb the concept of beauty. In other words, beauty is fabricated and is dependent on other properties such as colonization, racial discrimination, and white superiority. Thus, the concept of beauty in Pecola's eyes is perceived through the lens of the white image paradigm, in which white is beautiful because whites are the superior race, as African Americans have been repeatedly told.

The antithesis of Pecola is Claudia. When a new girl named Maureen Peal, with lighter skin, arrives at Claudia's and Pecola's school, many children are envious of her. Maureen receives praise and admiration for her appearance, which society deems beautiful. Unlike the others, Claudia refuses to succumb to Maureen's perceived superiority based solely on her beauty. Even as a child, Claudia is acutely aware of the injustices prevailing in her society and, in her own manner, rebels against them. One Christmas, when she is gifted a large blue-eyed baby doll, she rebels by dismembering it. Through this act, Claudia appears to be grappling with the origins of white supremacy and striving to dismantle it.

Moreover, later in the novel, Claudia prays that Pecola's baby survive, believing that the baby will counteract American society's standards of beauty. The girl hopes that Pecola's black baby will somehow change people's views and make them see blackness as something that can be admired and beautiful. Whereas Pecola represents the victim of the white image paradigm, Claudia represents those who, although still in bondage, try to break free from that paradigm and become emancipated, accepting beauty not as a set of physical attributes but as a construction made by the dominant group in society.

The beauty myth, regarded as a social construct, has been a focal point in numerous feminist discussions. Wolf (1991) contends that despite advancements in gender equality, women continue to be constrained by the persisting influence of this myth. This presents a dual challenge for black women, who must combat both gender and racial discrimination simultaneously. Wolf (1991) emphasizes the necessity of abolishing the beauty myth, as its perpetuation serves as a constant reminder of women's vulnerability. Entrapped within societal beauty standards, women are subjected to immense pressure to conform to predetermined ideals.

The beauty myth has long been a problematic issue. Self-identity is a social construct shaped by individual experiences. According to social identification theory, individuals exhibit strong reactions when their identity is threatened, such as in cases of group failure or negative events. One common response to identity threats is social mobility, where individuals seek to align themselves with groups of higher status or perceived success (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). Numerous studies have explored these reactions to identity challenges, consistently finding that people vigorously defend their group identity. The beauty myth problem examined in Toni Morrison's novel illustrates how, in a discrepant attempt to assimilate into the white dominant group, Pecola faces a threat to acknowledge and accept her own identity.

Research indicates that individuals are inclined and motivated to maintain a positive social identity, often by expressing preference for members of their own group over those outside of it. Studies show that people tend to ascribe more positive characteristics to members of their own group (Brewer, 1979) and perceive their group's actions as appropriate (Abrams, Thomas, Hogg, 1990), likely in a desire and effort to reinforce their social identity. Therefore, individuals often seek affirmation and favorable self-regard from their group by demonstrating bias toward in-group members over those belonging to out-groups, as embodied in the white and black paradigm represented in *The Bluest Eye*.

Mead (1934: 135) asserts that "the self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity," and further explains that the self "develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process." As viewed in *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's self-identity is heavily constructed around the prevailing white image paradigm in which beauty corresponds

to whiteness and ugliness to blackness. As a result, influenced and affected deeply by this perception, she loses her sense of self, relating her hardships to her black skin color. Throughout the novel, Pecola experiences a profound identity transformation shaped by the pervasive influence of the white, racist, and class-conscious dominant society, finally leading to her losing her mind.

Toni Morrison argues that racism has exerted a profound impact on the self-perception of African American females, especially young African girls. The author highlights the predominant role of societal influences in shaping these sense-of-self perceptions over the molding family structure. As illustrated with the image of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison contends that the idolized beauty standards imposed on African women, especially at an early stage of life, shatter their self-evaluation and perceptions, often resulting in unforeseen consequences. The novel explores the complex connections between racism, societal beauty standards, and self-identity, with racism serving as the foundation for the warped beauty ideals and the subsequent erosion of self-identity experienced by characters trapped in the beauty myth. At bottom, the elimination of racism would demolish the white beauty myth and help raise self-identity evaluation.

During the scenes of parental bedlam, Pecola wishes to make herself “disappear” (39). However, she is trapped in her loveless home, unable to escape the community’s rejection due to her perceived ugliness, despite her futile attempts: “Each night, without fail, she pray[s] for blue eyes,” and “she [is] not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen [will] take a long, long time.” While dreaming of beauty, Pecola also wonders why she is shunned by the people around her: “Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness...that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike” (39).

Morrison skillfully portrays Pecola’s inner turmoil as she grapples with the reasons behind her perceived invisibility to others; the reader gains insight into its secret, seen as ensconced in a cultural societal construct of ‘ugliness’ and its impact on her self-perception. The narrator tells us, in the novel’s only concrete description of Pecola’s facial features, that “her teeth [are] good, and at least her nose [is] not big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute” (40). Where, then, does Pecola’s ugliness reside? Pecola is “ignored and despised” not only because of her bitter, indigent parents but also because she is, as the “high-yellow dream children” (52) call her, “black and ugly” (61), contending with the weight of racial prejudice and societal beauty standards that deem her unworthy of acceptance.

Pecola’s search for identity is influenced by her community’s hierarchy of color and caste. While it is rooted in the white model for beauty, it has undergone a necessary modification: those members who appear whiter are given preference over those who are darker. In the socio-historical context of black oppression, the significance of appearances has consistently equated to seeking validation and approval from the dominant group, regardless of how illusory such validations may

be. Consequently, individuals who can emulate white social codes may aspire to move socially and economically in both the black and white worlds; thus, color serves to determine class order.

In *The Bluest Eye*, the double jeopardy of being both poor and ugly excludes Pecola and her family from sharing in whatever social or economic tidbits are offered. Moreover, neither Pecola nor her parents can fully comprehend the depth of their ostracism and, therefore, are further disempowered, unable to strategize effectively to improve their situation. To grasp the extent of the community's disregard for Pecola, hindering her quest for identity, Morrison abruptly shifts the narrative from "Autumn" to "Winter." These chapters delve into the cold, sterile undercurrents within the community, where the basis for continuity patterns a white, bourgeois social model that, for the author, denies all "passion[s]" and "human emotions" (68) in black life, severely impacting Pecola's journey of self-discovery. Within the "Autumn" chapters, the narrator reflects on the adaptive development of urban black women: "They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave" (68).

The above passage suggests that black women, because of the imposition of a society dominated by white male ideologies, become someone they are not. The effects of the minorities' acceptance of the norms of the dominant group may be severely detrimental to their conception of themselves. In Pecola's case, her search for self-identity is framed by her longing to join the dominant group.

Pecola's search for self-identity can be explained by what Jean-Paul Sartre calls "the Look." According to Sartre (1966), one's reality and identity are both confirmed and threatened by "the Look of the Other," the Other, in this instance, constituting the gaze of white media images: "I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities." To think of oneself as an individual is to exist in a world of potentialities, but one remains subjected to the gaze of the Other as an object in another's perception: "The Other as a look is only that – my transcendence transcended" (239). If one can appropriate the Other in one's own world, one can therefore transcend it: "Thus, my project of recovering myself is fundamentally a project of absorbing the Other" (340).

Thus, Polly, Pecola's mother, grapples with uncertainty in her quest for self-identity. Morrison suggests that she struggles because she attempts to control her potential self while simultaneously seeking validation from the Other. Caught between her own sense of self and the perceptions of others, Polly cannot fully realize her potential or confidently confirm her identity. She consciously rejects her potential self, lamenting, "There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone... Look like I just didn't care no more after that. I let

my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (98). However, this retreat only serves to evade the responsibility of self-definition, allowing the pervasive gaze of white society to persist.

Pecola, along with her mother Polly and the rest of the black neighborhood, becomes frozen into an unnatural position, described by Jameson (1971) as a “we-object,” subjected to the continual gaze of a “Third.” Pecola’s silent, sacrificial presence in the novel serves a symbolic function for those around her. Trapped as “we-objects,” they find solace in Pecola’s dissolution. As Claudia recalls, “All of us — all who knew her — felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her” (159).

Toni Morrison’s masterful writing constitutes an intricate range of emotions, steering the tension between denying and affirming one’s sense of self and community belonging. The characters in *The Bluest Eye* are confronted with incompatible desires, related emotions, and false beliefs, navigating through various states and situations, including desire and suppression, control and chaos, attraction and repulsion, as well as attachment and disengagement. Within this atmosphere of uncertainty, there lingers a measure of despair that seems to negate all hope for renewal. The eleven-year-old protagonist of the novel, Pecola Breedlove, is unable to find and construe a fully realized identity for herself; in the process, she falls victim to madness. And yet, there comes a measure of affirmation that points to the potential for cultural regeneration. In Morrison’s narrative, the focus consistently moves beyond the isolated, dystopian self and toward the possibility for a desired, unified collective identity.

Overall, *The Bluest Eye* makes it obvious that the cultural standards of beauty and their association with racism really affect one’s perspective on life and, therefore, one’s search for self-identity. In the narrative, Pecola becomes consumed by the concept of beauty defined and upheld by the ideology of white males. Her desire to fit into the dominant group ultimately leads to her downfall. In conclusion, Morrison’s novel suggests to readers that, in the quest for self-identity, it is essential to acknowledge one’s origins. Furthermore, the novel advocates for societal acceptance of diversity and emphasizes that beauty is a construction of the prevailing social system. The book underscores that the true ugliness lies within the oppressive white male system, which unjustly marginalizes women, people of color, and other disenfranchised and excluded groups. It suggests that the eradication of racism is essential to dismantle the beauty myth that hinders people’s lives. Eliminating racism will offer the Black community a clearer path forward and ultimately facilitate their positive integration into society.

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