



1994

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Recommended Citation

Russell, Mariann (1994) "Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Sacred Heart University Review*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/shureview/vol14/iss1/4>

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Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

. . . this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, the 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.

W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*

Here cited is W.E.B. DuBois' classic statement of the African-American "double consciousness," a statement addressing a kind of cultural mulattoism and a resulting sensibility which belongs to two worlds. It addresses the phenomenon of two different value systems incorporated in "one dark body." DuBois is indicating how the black American's consciousness or sensibility coexists with one which devalues it, how African-American self-esteem is jolted by internalized "white values." Looking at Toni Morrison's first published novel *The Bluest Eye*, one can see her exploring this world of "double consciousness"; in fact, she takes the concept further as she not only depicts a protagonist who is judged by the tape measure of white American values, but she also presents an African-American child whose identity is *nullified* by these cultural values.

As Jane Kuenz in "*The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity*" has pointed out, "Morrison seems to move her examination of Pecola's life back and forth from the axis of race to that of gender."¹ Images and elements of racial and gender identification are conflated in the person of eleven-year-old Pecola Breedlove, who pays attention not to images of white male power but to images of white female beauty. Kuenz

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also has noted that Pecola's difficulty arises from her identification of herself as synonymously black and ugly. Popular culture of Lorain, Ohio projects images of female beauty that deny Pecola's self. The beautiful is blond and blue-eyed; Pecola as an "ugly" dark black girl is shut out from any valorization of self in the communications media. Pecola simply does not exist in any aesthetic sense.

Morrison uses various narrative strategies to expose the blasting of Pecola's psyche. Chief among these is the use of various perspectives expressed by different voices. Not all of these voices speak of black/white disesteem for blackness. Some, such as Mrs. MacTeer, reveal a firm and positive sense of self. Other voices speak in reverie, gossip, song, and/or "fussing," giving a sense of the texture of black communal life. The voices of such grotesques as the prostitutes, China, Poland, and Maginot Line, and the pedophile, Soaphead Church, also add to the layering of black experience. Some voices especially illustrate black valorization: the double perspective of the nine-year-old narrator, Claudia, and her adult self who reviews and comments on Pecola's experience esteems Pecola and relates her victimization by black and white.

One of the most effective narrative strategies is Morrison's manipulation of the Dick and Jane story to illustrate the perspective of the dominant community and its relation to the black community in general and the Breedlove family in particular. *The Bluest Eye* begins with a passage about Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane who live happily in a green and white house with a cat and dog. The language and syntax are appropriate for a first reader of that day. As those of us who used such readers remember, we were taught how to read, but we were also exposed to the "typical" American family, which was white without any intrusion of black as neighbor, friend, or schoolmate. The representative family imaged is an unmistakably white American family constellation.

Morrison has the same short passage copied in smaller print and without punctuation and capitalization so that some odd juxtapositions such as "father dick" occur. Finally, she copies the same passage without punctuation, capitalization or spacing in very small print so that the passage reads like a manic response to the first excerpt from Dick and Jane:

Rundogrunlooklookherecomesafriend.²

Later in the novel, some line from the Dick and Jane story heads various sections of the book in heavily ironic fashion. For example, the "green shuttered house" introduces the storefront where the Breedlove family lives; the mother laughing introduces a section where Pecola's mother reminisces about her life with her frequently brutal husband. The section where Pecola is raped by her father is introduced by a line about Father playing with Jane. Reference to a cat prefigures Junior, son of a lower middle class black family, hurling his mother's cat at Pecola, thus expressing his hatred of mother, cat, and Pecola. The Dick and Jane reference to a family dog prefaces a section where Pecola is tricked into poisoning a dog beloved by its elderly owner. In each case, the manic printing, the chaos of letters run together, signals the Breedlove family's stunted existence.

The voice of Claudia MacTeer, who shares aspects of Pecola's experience and narrates them from her own perspective, contradicts the Dick and Jane story. Claudia is still young enough to value her African-American self, to be immune to blond, blue-eyed dolls' unchallenged appeal, and to see that while "light-skinned" Maureen Peal is more popular, she is not "brighter" or "nicer" than she and her sister. Claudia genuinely likes Pecola. Prepubescent and in some ways presocialized, Claudia is clear-eyed enough to resist the pull of images of white female beauty. The adult Claudia sees Pecola's obsession with blue-eyes as one extreme of the socialization of blacks in America.

Given the context of pervasive white cultural values, Pecola's involvement with the blond, blue-eyed seems not abnormal at first. Both she and Claudia's ten-year-old sister Frieda, "love" Shirley Temple, "so cu-ute." The film image of the charming Shirley extends to such things as Shirley Temple mugs. Pecola drinks mug after mug of milk for the pleasure of seeing, "eating," in a sense becoming Shirley Temple. When Pecola goes to a store to buy candy, she chooses Mary Jane for the pleasure of gazing at, "eating," becoming the blue-eyed Mary Jane.

And of course there are the blond, blue-eyed dolls that Claudia has given her at Christmas: "all the world had agreed that a blue-

eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured" (p. 20). Among that world is Pecola, whose mother later slaps her while she cooingly ministers to the pink and white child of her employers. The blue-eyed seem to pervade the text, as even the all black cat hurled at Pecola has blue eyes.

White female images are further displayed by films. The avatars of beauty are Shirley Temple, Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Jean Harlow, Betty Grable, and Hedy Lamarr. There, in a world of romantic love and worth validated by physical beauty, Pecola's mother receives a disastrous idea of "how to be loved" and virtually destroys her family as a result: "She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen" (p. 97).

But real people also are involved in this scale of beauty to non-beauty. Considered "ugly," Pecola is ignored by teachers and other students, except the boys who taunt and victimize her, thus expressing their own "exquisitely learned self hatred. . . . 'Black e mo Black e mo Ya daddy sleeps nekked . . .'" (p. 55), they chant. On the other hand, Maureen Peal, a "high-yellow dream child," rich and advantaged, appears like a "false spring." She charms the teachers and the black boys who taunt Pecola; the black and white girls all love Maureen. Claudia intuitively, "the *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (p. 62).

Pecola finally succumbs to her earlier wish to have pretty blue eyes, eyes so pretty that the happy family life imagined for the blond, blue-eyed would be hers. Pecola, searching to "have somebody love her," is briefly endeared to her father, who, drunk and dangerously "free," rapes and impregnates the eleven-year-old. Forbidden to go to school, she asks Soaphead Church, supposed to have magic powers, for blue eyes. All her misery, all her "ugliness" can be removed by the acquisition of blue eyes. Pecola and her fragmented other self admire in the mirror the new blue eyes they alone see, as the "little-girl-gone-to-woman" (p. 28) withdraws from the painful experience which is her life.

The story ends with Pecola schizophrenic and her child stillborn. The adult Claudia sees the schizophrenic picking through the garbage of the community, making plain the nullification of her

black and vulnerable self. Claudia sees the woman, who had been considered ugly by all, even her own mother, who had been disregarded by almost all except her father, as a scapegoat for the community: "All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed" (p. 159). The adult narrator sees in Pecola: "the waste and beauty of the world — which is what she herself was" (p. 159).

The whole book has developed Pecola's search for the answer to her question: "How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?" The devastating answer that Pecola herself fashions is that blue eyes will make "somebody" love her. As Morrison has powerfully demonstrated: "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment" (p. 158).

Notes

¹Jane Kuenz, "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," *African American Review*, 27 (1993), 424.

²Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1972), p. 8. All further quotations from this book will be indicated by page numbers in the text of my essay.