

## CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND BEAUTY CONSTRUCTS: AN ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S "THE BLUEST EYE"

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### ABSTRACT

*This article analyses how *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's earliest novel, presents beauty ideals, identity formation, and societal transformation. Drawing on Morrison's representation of the tragic protagonist Pecola Breedlove, the analysis explores how dominant white standards of beauty become embedded within black culture, leading to destructive internalized racism and self-hatred. It discusses Morrison's skillful storytelling techniques for highlighting the tragic gap between Pecola's actual black female identity and her unattainable white feminine ideal. Additionally, the paper demonstrates how Morrison utilizes Pecola's story to astutely critique the influential role of culture in shaping beauty ideals that engender self-loathing and fractured identities in 1940s America. Further, it outlines how textbooks, family backgrounds, and communities significantly shape what is considered beautiful. The authors argued that Morrison's novel is like an insightful mirror that reflects how cultural beliefs about beauty find their way into societies. This paper also argues for the urgent need to challenge pervasive racism and bias, engender deep self-loathing and fractured identities in young black girls, and advocate for more inclusive standards of beauty and self-worth. The authors believe that nearly fifty years after its publication, Morrison's brilliant literature remains vital to ongoing efforts toward inclusion, empowerment, and social transformation.*

**Keywords:** *The Bluest Eye*; Racial identity; Ethnicity; racialized beauty.

### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's acclaimed novel *The Bluest Eye* provides insightful commentary on the construction of beauty ideals and their damaging psychological impact, specifically within the African-American community. Morrison's powerful writing style captures the tragic effects of internalized racism and self-hatred stemming from dominant white beauty standards. Her novel explores how Eurocentric beauty ideals become embedded in black culture. Morrison vividly depicts how young black girls like Pecola Breedlove contort themselves to fit narrow cultural definitions of beauty, equating virtue with whiteness (Mayberry, 2021).

The storytelling style of writing goes beyond mere narration, offering thoughtful insights into human experiences. Morrison's literary works explore the intricate relationship between societal expectations and the pursuit of beauty through the mastery, shaping, and questioning of thoughts. Schools and other educational institutions, such as colleges and universities, can significantly impact how people view beauty from an early age. Specifically, Morrison portrays how schools reinforce warped beauty constructs by teaching black girls to admire white baby dolls. This reflects broader cultural narratives denigrating black features while upholding white beauty norms. They can either reinforce or challenge cultural beliefs about what is considered attractive.

Through Pecola's story, Morrison provides incisive social commentary on how American culture's racist notions of beauty infiltrate the black community. Pecola's obsessive desire for blue eyes represents a longing for acceptance in a society that excludes and devalues blackness. Morrison invites critique of the dominant cultural forces that construct such limiting beauty ideals.

In her analysis of ethnic beauty, Morrison emphasizes this topic's historical and cultural importance. Because schools are like small communities, they often reflect the current ideas about what is considered beautiful. Intervening and implementing a new structure for Morrison seems like a viable option. Toni Morrison, a renowned literary artist, weaves an interesting story that explores the significant influence of social progress, the complex elements of creative expression, and the transformative power of education (Morrison).

Through her *The Bluest Eye* novel, Morrison effectively explores the intricate relationship between cultural norms and how people perceive them, explicitly exploring the construction and questioning of beauty ideals and their societal impact. Her novel offers a thought-provoking commentary on these themes, extending beyond mere entertainment (Mayberry, 2021)

The researchers also believe that educational institutions represent not only places of learning but also reflect and influence societal values. Morrison's writing illustrates these settings as microcosms of broader societal concerns about beauty and identity. While educational institutions can reinforce existing norms, they offer opportunities for transformation, self-discovery, and disruption.

Based on the short review above, this paper demonstrates how cultural influences surrounding beauty become embedded in social institutions and the psychology of young girls. Morrison compellingly portrays the need to challenge forces like media, family, and education that distort beauty constructs with tragic human consequences. It also explores the complex interplay between cultural standards and beauty ideals in educational settings, as described in Morrison's novels.

## Materials and Methods

This research adopted a qualitative methodology, conducting an in-depth literary analysis of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*. AbuHamda et al. (2021, p. 71) stated "Quantitative and qualitative methods are the engine behind evidence-based outcomes."

As a seminal work of African-American literature, Morrison's text warrants close examination for its sophisticated social commentary on beauty, identity, race, and culture.

Following established practices for qualitative textual analysis, the methodology involved repeated close readings of the primary source, *The Bluest Eye*. Detailed notes and annotations were compiled to identify key themes, characterize Morrison's literary techniques, and extract relevant quotations as evidence.

The analysis was further informed by secondary sources retrieved through academic databases, including scholarly journal articles and book chapters discussing Morrison's representations of beauty, education, identity, and culture. These sources provided contextual grounding to situate the primary textual analysis within existing literary scholarship.

With an interpretive, qualitative lens, the literary devices, imagery, characterization, setting, and voice in *The Bluest Eye* were analyzed. Attention was given to both the denotative content and connotative meanings embedded in Morrison's poetic prose. Themes were identified inductively by compiling coded notes from extensive passages.

To develop the educational analysis, curriculum studies sources were consulted regarding pedagogical issues of representation, voice, and the learning environment's role in cultural constructs of beauty. Character experiences were examined qualitatively for what they revealed about the family, community, and broader cultural forces at work in Morrison's novel.

## Results and Discussion

## Morrison's Literary Exploration of Racialized Beauty

*The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's earliest novel, published in 1987, is not only highly influenced by the prejudiced Western norms of beauty but also exhibits how the emotions and expressions of the rest of the characters shift based only on what they see. When the novel's setting is compared to today's generation, there is no significant difference in that the current generation has all been raised to believe that the color "white" is always used to denote or describe something beautiful, unlike the color "black." This stereotype of colors associated with race has also been brought into society by Western traditions and their perception of beauty.

Through her work *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison also acknowledges that on one side, the color white is used as a symbol of beauty. The worth of the color black shrinks, making the younger generation believe that all women who are white are exceptionally beautiful. That is the sole characteristic of someone with good looks.

Morrison brightly shows how narrow cultural definitions of beauty permeate Pecola's family, school, and church, causing her to equate virtue and humanity with Eurocentric phenotypic traits like blonde hair and blue eyes. Pecola obsessively desires blue eyes, representative of whiteness, which she believes will earn her acceptance and admiration. By tracing the origins of Pecola's distorted self-image, Morrison provides incisive commentary on how societal beauty constructs can psychologically damage young black girls.

All the Disney stories that young kids read describe the female protagonists as tall, fair-skinned, with high cheekbones, thin lips, long silky hair, and a sharp nose, which has become taboo. In contrast, Morrison, in her novels, takes pride in characterizing her female protagonists as black yet very beautiful. Morrison's novels try to make a difference in how communities perceive beauty and how they are taught to perceive it throughout their lives.

Morrison not only focuses on representing the uniqueness of the color "black" and expressing it on a more positive platform, but she also portrays the pain, loss, and suffering that her female protagonists go through only because they are black and detested by everyone because of their color.

## Toni Morrison's Vision: Beauty and Societal Transformation

Though research shows that the perception of beauty has been evolving and changing throughout the years, one thing that has not changed is how people and society react and categorize something as beautiful or ugly.

The imagery created in minds through words that people listen to almost every day impacts segregating something into levels of beauty. Research shows that the influence of society directs the way of thinking as well as decisions of most of the people around. It is not only what people hear but also what people read. In her novel, Toni Morrison described the reaction of society and people towards Pecola, her color, and her physical features.

The novel *The Bluest Eye* was written and published during the time of the Great Depression. With the economic crisis, the people were divided into different classes and ranks. The implications that the society laid down had an unpropitious effect on the weakest and unfavorable members of the society. A difference was evident in the way people looked at the lower ranks and the outcasts. Morrison's description of the white family of Dick and Jane and her description of Pecola can be identified as two mismatched topics (Higgins, 1997).

During these times, society had set certain presumptions about color and beauty that clearly made the people dissatisfied, vexed, and aggrieved about their complexion and physical attributes. In the novel, Pecola's admiration for Shirley Temple and her perception of beauty exemplifies her malcontent about her looks and how much she wishes to transform herself, at least something close to Shirley Temple. According to Pecola, having blonde curls and blue eyes were the only image of beauty, the only aspects required to look attractive. If truth be told, it was the discernment of the society ascribed to the fugitives. This venomous seed of feigning beauty implanted in the minds of not only the adults but also the small children in the society led to the despondent fate of Pecola.

Where "color of the skin" is one ailment that is well brought out in the novel by Morrison, Pecola being a "female" is another ingredient of her incapability to scrimp against the iniquity she faced. The White clan, during the period of the Great Depression, used to domineer the Black people. For the most part, they used to drag and target mainly Black men and children, but Pecola, being a Black woman, made her acquiescent and compliant to everyone irrespective of sexuality. In the novel, Pecola is mistreated by everyone, taken advantage of, molested, and raped, yet no one bothers since she is affiliated with a lower fraternity rank.

The cruel pennants of charm and beauty placed by the community transform the deportment of most of the people in the novel. The Black people become a toy in the hands of the White people, and no one even cares an inch about the feelings and emotions of the minor children fed with the community's superfluous ordinance.

## Beauty, Identity, and Self-Worth

From the novel's beginning, the entire idea of beauty has been absorbed and tampered with. Morrison's main characters, Claudia and Pecola, are portrayed to be obsessed with transforming themselves to match the standards of beauty placed by the community. The characteristics of both Pecola and Claudia are sketched to be someone who is discontented with

their own attributes and physical features. The influence of society on both characters is that they are willing to go to any extent to change themselves to be accepted by society. There is nothing that they really admire or love about themselves.

The message imparted in the novel is something that women of today can totally relate to. Although the novel mostly tries to connect and draw a bridge between the concepts of body image distortion and race, it also speaks about self-worth and self-identity through the characters of Pecola and Claudia. Both the characters in the novel endure agony due to their appearances, which they try to alter and wish to change to fit into the traditional society. Society's and others' behavior towards Pecola makes her detest her appearance to an extreme level where being in her own skin feels intolerable. Through her obsessive desire for blue eyes, the quintessential marker of Eurocentric beauty ideals, Pecola begins conflating virtue, acceptance, and humanity by attaining phenotypic traits associated with whiteness.

The issues of self-perception and self-worth are perennial. They have prevailed since and will continue to do so. At every stage of one's life, one questions one's worth, which is mostly questioned and attacked by the people around. The novel *The Bluest Eye* also revolves around the lack of self-esteem and self-love, which ends up with the protagonist desiring the unachievable. The first step to being admired and loved by others begins by loving oneself.

The concept of self-love is tarnished and attacked at every stage in the novel *The Bluest Eye*, right from the beginning. An image of beauty has been installed in the protagonists' minds since the first chapter, where we come across Claudia admiring and playing with white dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes. Pecola, in the novel, too, starts believing that she will be appreciated and approved by everyone once she gets blue eyes.

However, the novel ends on a poignant yet pragmatic note in contrast to the theme of conceptualized beauty standards and hurting one's self-esteem. Towards the end, Pecola starts believing that she has blue eyes due to the disturbed mental state she is left in.

### **Beauty within Educational Apparatus: Curriculum and Representation**

Morrison's work has left a fingerprint in education due to its importance in reaching high standards of excellence. The researchers believe that academic institutions such as schools, colleges, or universities play a significant role in how students perceive beauty. Students' exposure to such works of beauty develops their understanding of beauty and benefits them in many ways.

As Morrison highlights, education profoundly influences young people's understanding of beauty and self-worth. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison portrays how the school curriculum and educational materials reinforce dominant white beauty ideals that psychologically damage young black girls like Pecola. Morrison vividly depicts how America's education system in the 1940s upheld Eurocentric beauty standards through biased textbooks, lessons, and activities (Lester, 2008).

For instance, Morrison writes about the Dick and Jane reading primers used to teach Pecola and other black students. These primers exclusively depicted idyllic white families, positioning whiteness as the norm for beauty, virtue, and acceptance. Young Pecola absorbs the message that her black identity is inadequate and ugly compared to the white children in her primers.

Morrison also provides the example of white baby dolls given to Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola to play with and care for. This teaches the young girls to admire and emulate white physical features from childhood. The toys propagate white beauty standards and leave Pecola feeling she is the "antithesis" of what is considered attractive.

The narrative approach used by Morrison is a fascinating examination of social structures. Morrison explores the relationships between social policies, cultural expectations, and the pursuit of beauty. Students who read her work can experience her distinguished explanation of beauty standards in a pervasive manner. With this in mind, students find this influencing their academic choices, especially program choices for their future careers (Sweeney, 2004).

It is well agreed that the school curriculum shapes students' perspectives on many aspects, including beauty. Beauty can be found in many school subjects, such as history, literature, and science. Teaching these subjects can significantly grow students' minds and lead them to adopt successful ideas, similar to how historical figures can reinforce pre-existing beliefs.

Curriculum designers are responsible for creating suitable textbooks for students; thus, they effectively transmit knowledge throughout society. As stated earlier, school books can shape students' real and imaginary minds in ways that align with societal norms. It is important to realize that textbooks are important in beauty standards as they can establish certain norms while disregarding others. In certain circumstances, students who adhere to established norms may feel affirmed, whereas those who do not may sense a sense of exclusion.

The impact of instructional strategies on students' self-perception is significant. When the textbook focuses on a certain perception of beauty, it can create an environment that generates inconsistencies and uncertainties. These can make students adopt these ideas as a measure of approval and success on their educational journey.

These instances demonstrate how educational curriculums can perpetuate cultural narratives around beauty that marginalize non-white experiences. The distorted lessons become ingrained in students' psyches, as evidenced by Pecola's

deep self-loathing. Morrison suggests intervention is needed to disrupt harmful beauty constructs transmitted through education.

The researchers argue that this connection between education and beauty can shape students' minds and impact their sense of identity and belonging. Therefore, the educational environment of Toni Morrison's writing is influenced by societal norms and artistic expression. The choice of textbooks, representation of historical figures, and illustrations in instructional materials all contribute to developing a specific artistic standard, leaving a long-lasting impression on students. While progress has been made, Eurocentric beauty ideals still permeate many aspects of the modern curriculum.

### **Beyond the Classroom: Family, Community, and Cultural Influence**

Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* explores how a person's identity, culture, and personal background affect how they see beauty. The story looks at how family, community, and society influence characters' ideas about beauty. The novel has many diverse characters. It thoroughly examines how history shapes the characters' changing views on beauty. The main message is understanding how family and community histories form the characters' feelings about beauty. The Breedlove family is stuck in poverty and hardship. They face the harsh truths about racial and economic inequality. Especially Pecola Breedlove, she internalizes the struggles. She sees beauty as an escape from her tough life. But the Claudia McTeer family develops self-worth and challenges the usual beauty standards. The book masterfully comments on how identity and outside forces affect a person's sense of self and views of beauty (Young, 2008).

In many societies, people thought elegance was associated with their family background. This belief is reinforced and shaped by shared experiences of prejudice and societal issues. It also leads to a common understanding of cultural and inclusive beauty. The influence of dominant white culture promotes the idea that light skin and Eurocentric features are the epitome of beauty. It impacts individuals' self-confidence and self-perception.

Furthermore, cultural factors deeply ingrained in family and society significantly shape characters' ideologies. The character Maureen Peel embodies white beauty standards. It highlights the cultural complexity of the region. Maureen's appearance elicits admiration and jealousy that reflects the deeply ingrained influences of cultural assimilation and fixation on external beauty.

In academic settings, the idea of attractiveness is shaped by a combination of family, community, and culture. Pecola desires blue eyes because she believes conforming to traditional beauty standards will solve her problems. On the other hand, Claudia is empowered by her family's principles and stands strong against societal pressures.

With this in mind, the characters such as Pecola and Claudia deeply resonate with students throughout their learning. It encourages critical reflection on the influences that shape their own ideas of beauty. The parallels between the characters' experiences and their own lives are obvious. It prompts students to question the source of their perception of beauty and its impact on their self-esteem. By connecting the literary world of *The Bluest Eye* with the educational settings, students can engage with each other and develop a more inclusive and critical approach to these complex concepts in their lives and society.

### **Towards Inclusive Beauty Pedagogies**

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores how family, community, and broader culture shape characters' understanding of beauty ideals. She demonstrates how societal messages about Eurocentric beauty become embedded in the black community. This leads to internalized racism and fractured self-image among young girls like Pecola.

The Breedlove family represents how poverty and racial oppression distort beauty constructs. Unemployed and abusive, Cholly Breedlove fails to nurture Pecola with fatherly love. Pauline Breedlove works as a servant to a white family, learning to prioritize white beauty norms over caring for her daughter. Having absorbed these dysfunctional family dynamics, Pecola internalizes that she could earn love and acceptance if she had white phenotypic traits like blonde hair and blue eyes.

Living in Lorain, Ohio, the black community has been conditioned through pervasive racism to value Eurocentric over Afrocentric features. Young girls like Pecola and Maureen are pitted against each other, striving for proximity to whiteness through their looks. Maureen embodies the valorization of light skin, long hair, and blue eyes. This reflects how dominant cultural values become ingrained within an oppressed community.

In contrast, Claudia MacTeer's family provides her with the self-love and racial pride needed to reject white beauty standards. Morrison demonstrates the critical impact family messaging and community values have in constructing youth's self-perception.

Nowadays, teachers are inspired by *The Bluest Eye* to adopt various strategies that encourage inclusive creative learning from multiple viewpoints. Including works like Morrison's in curricula allows students to discuss dominant aesthetic norms actively. The adversity characters like Pecola face catalyzes conversations about the consequences of limited beauty standards and motivate students to challenge their beliefs.

In academic settings, it is important to encourage discussions that bring to light biases related to race, culture, and identity. Analyzing the characters' experiences in a novel can help learners understand the origins of bias and confront its impact. This learning approach fosters self-awareness and empathy and is crucial in implementing diverse perspectives of beauty.

Furthermore, teaching literature can develop analytical thinking for students and other language skills. For example, a recent study conducted on teaching writing skills through English literature stated, "literature is rich in linguistic knowledge and has been proved as a good source of well-developed structure" (Ismail and Mallemari, 2020). With attention to *The Bluest Eye*, it effectively illustrates the negative effects of conforming to societal standards. By encouraging students to critically examine media interpretations of beauty and explore historical and cultural contexts, they are empowered to form their own well-informed opinions. Additionally, incorporating a narrative like *The Bluest Eye* into the curriculum raises cross-cultural understanding. Students can develop a shared sense of empathy and knowledge by understanding the struggles faced by the characters and the significant nature of aesthetic challenges. This understanding sets the stage for breaking down the divisive concept of beauty.

Expressively, *The Bluest Eye* encourages transformative educational practices by promoting a new approach to aesthetics training. Teachers can teach a deeper sense of self-acceptance and appreciation for diversity through comprehensive techniques. Characters like Claudia challenge societal norms and inspire students to question preconceived notions. This leads to a generation that values beauty in all its forms. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* prompts readers to consider complex topics, inspires education reform, and promotes alternative perspectives. Through the sensitive portrayal of characters like Pecola, Morrison invites critique of Eurocentrism's internal and external perpetuation.

## Conclusion

In all her novels, Morrison has drawn readers' attention to gender identity, racial hostility, toxic masculinity, barbarousness, subjugation and oblation within the African-American community in 1940s America. Through Pecola Breedlove's tragic story, Morrison illustrates how dominant white standards become embedded in black culture, leading to internalized racism and fractured self-image among young black girls. Her powerful writing compels critique of the systems that perpetuate limiting beauty constructs with tragic human costs.

Beyond its social commentary, *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates Morrison's artful storytelling techniques. Her vivid portrayals of characters like Pauline and Cholly Breedlove reveal the complex interplay between community influences and individual psychology. Morrison's rich symbolic language, such as her metaphorical use of the Dick and Jane primer, provides deeper thematic resonance. Her nonlinear narrative structure masterfully weaves different voices and perspectives into a cohesive whole. These literary devices underscore Morrison's skills as a novelist while enhancing her nuanced social critique (Kubitschek, 1999).

Characters in Morrison's novel are also highly inspired by the education imparted to them by the family they belong to. For instance, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* has been taught to have a perception that anything black is associated with ugliness. The references made in the novel also endeavor to achieve an outlook where the colour "black" denotes something that is not attractive or beautiful. The educational system today focuses more on people's social outlook and personality rather than their intelligence. Research has shown that in the paradigm of education, globally in this time, students need to be shaped emotionally more than physically. The psychology of young children is sculpted in their early years. Therefore, the knowledge about behavior, culture and traditions imparted to them by society plays a prominent role in carving their personalities in the future. Most of the education imparted to us in our lives directs and influences behavior in society. Morrison skillfully depicts how family dysfunction, biased school curriculums, community dynamics, and broader cultural narratives ingrain the message that virtue and humanity are equated with Eurocentric phenotypic traits. This causes vulnerable individuals like Pecola to develop corrosive self-hatred in their quest for an unattainable ideal.

In contrast, Claudia MacTeer's story provides hope for resistance and self-love. *The Bluest Eye* prompts society to challenge pervasive racism and reform systems that engender the devaluation of blackness. Morrison advocates for more inclusive, empowering standards of beauty and self-worth.

*The Bluest Eye* remains a seminal work for its piercing examination of how sociocultural forces can become internalized to destructive effect. Morrison's sophisticated storytelling deepens understanding of the characters' experiences while inviting society to challenge its role in perpetuating injustice. The novel continues to inspire readers, educators, and activists to oppose limiting beauty constructs and systemic racism. Her impactful work highlights literature's power to compellingly reflect and shape human culture.

## Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest among them.

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