

Spring 2018

# Feminist Critique on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Karen Ruiz

*Augustana College, Rock Island Illinois*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/mabryaward>

---

## Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Ruiz, Karen. "Feminist Critique on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*" (2018). *Eddie Mabry Diversity Award*.  
<https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/mabryaward/8>

This Student Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Prizewinners at Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Eddie Mabry Diversity Award by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@augustana.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@augustana.edu).

Karen Ruiz

June 14, 2016

Feminist Critique Analysis on Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison is a Pulitzer Prize and Nobel-Prize winning American novelist, editor, and professor. Morrison's work frequently explores the African-American experience in many forms. At a young age, Morrison's family migrated north in an effort to escape racial prejudice and seek economic opportunity. Having grown up in a family who strongly appreciated black culture, Morrison was heavily influenced. Her childhood was full of storytelling, folktales and songs concerning black identity and culture. Her novel, *The Bluest Eye*, concerns the lives of Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, and Pecola Breedlove. The novel divulges 1940's racist American society and a black adolescent girls' struggle to achieve white ideals of beauty. Subject to victimization from a society that ignores her, Pecola represents the callous treatment of black children and their internalizations of their oppression. Everyone around her, including her own parents and community, makes her feel worthless and disempowered. In an effort to redefine herself to fit a standard of beauty that so adamantly excludes her, Pecola falsely adopts blue eyes. Pecola Breedlove is driven into a state of madness after she believes she has magically acquired blue eyes. In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores black females' exposure to a standard of beauty within which they cannot identify. The interactions with a society so deeply rejectful of blackness instill a sense of inferiority and hatred that threatens black female perception.

Pecola Breedlove's interaction with a white shopkeeper showcases Pecola's cognizance of the rejection and invisibility her blackness grants her in society. In the white shopkeeper, Pecola notes "the total absence of human recognition-- the glazed separateness." She is aware of the "interest, disgust, even anger, in male grown eyes." that the people around her see her with. Nonetheless, Pecola is well aware that "the distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her flux and anticipation. Her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, and creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes." (Morrison, 48-49) Pecola

believes the white man, Mr. Yacobowski is not interested in interacting or even glancing at her all due to her skin color. He is stout and grows impatient with Pecola's silence. The shopkeeper reacts resentfully when Pecola extends her hand to pay for the candy and harshly grazes her palm with his nails in the process of receiving the coins. Susmita Roye expresses how "nothing can convince these little girls of their otherness more than this utter lack of recognition of their humanity in the eyes of the other, mostly white, people." (215) The involvement of a white-skinned, blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty ideal in Pecola's society serves as the destructive power that causes her to believe in her own abjection and worthlessness. The experience in the store supports the idea of white superiority and the prevalence of racism that deeply affects Pecola. The interaction ultimately causes Pecola to change her own perception of herself, and instills in her a sense of shame and inferiority.

Pecola Breedlove's experience with Maureen Peal, a light-skinned wealthy girl, progresses Pecola's own comprehension of the appearance she lacks and the implication of the appearance she does possess. After Maureen buys Pecola ice cream following an ugly encounter with some boys from school, Maureen begins to taunt her about seeing her father naked. As Claudia and Frieda come to Pecola's defense, Maureen begins to scream "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I am cute!" Pecola, embarrassed and disappointed, seems to "fold into herself, like a pleated wing." (Morrison, 73) Claudia acknowledges that girls like her and Frieda and Pecola would always be 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." (Morrison, 74) Dorothea Drummond Mbalia distinguishes how Maureen Peal's appearance in *The Bluest Eye* is associated with "the question of intraracial prejudice

based on skin color.” (3) Maureen “sees herself as superior because she looks more like her oppressors.” (3) Maureen verbally attacks the girls by using the same dehumanizing names that the boys at school used towards Pecola. Pecola is defenseless and vulnerable to Maureen and the boys’ degradation. She easily believes her and submits to her insignificance and ugliness.

Although Claudia and Frieda, at the time, do not possess a sense of self-hatred, Claudia becomes aware that Maureen’s appearance is what makes her beautiful. Claudia realizes that the thing to fear is the standards that make girls like Maureen be seen as beautiful and thus, worthwhile.

Pecola’s encounter with Geraldine, a light-skinned woman who encourages her son to play with white children only, reinforces the idea that Pecola’s blackness is deplorable. After luring Pecola into his home, Geraldine’s son Junior traps her in a room and torments her. When Pecola begins to pet Geraldine’s cat, the black cat that Geraldine loves and shows more affection towards than her own son, Junior reacts angrily by violently grabbing the cat. He flings the cat against a window and it slumps weakly onto a radiator. After Geraldine walks in asking for an explanation, Junior blames Pecola of killing the cat. Geraldine proceeds to examine Pecola, “the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out.” (Morrison, 91) Geraldine orders to Pecola, “get out of my house”, calling her a “nasty little black bitch.” (Morrison, 92) The ferocity with which Geraldine insults Pecola for what she herself possesses, blackness, demonstrates her own internalizing of whiteness as the standard of beauty. Once she sees Pecola, “she is reminded of everything she has sought to escape-- everything associated with the poor struggling African masses: their physical appearance, their behavioral patterns, their lifestyle, their speech patterns.” (Mbalia, 3) It is with an effort to isolate herself from her own identity, one that she disregards but essentially shares with Pecola, that Geraldine lashes out at Pecola by highlighting her blackness.

Not only is Pecola rejected by her white superiors, but also by those who share race and her blackness, the component that brings about rejection.

Pecola's regular experience with violence at the Breedlove household contributes to her own abjection and self-hatred. Morrison divulges the regularity with which "Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking." (43) Pecola convinces herself that "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." Pecola believes that if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove would not act as badly as they do. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at the pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (Morrison, 46) Pecola perceives her ugliness as a trigger to the violence she is exposed to at home. She convinces herself that the poor treatment and abuse she witnesses is at the fault of her ugliness. She prays for blue eyes because she believes that they will change her situation at home and stop the brutality between Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove. The Breedloves have even "less claim to stability which is so difficult to develop in a society where blacks are constantly dehumanized by the dominant culture." (Roye, 219) Pecola's absence of care and constant exposure to domestic conflict cultivates in her a sense of loneliness and victimization and a desperation for the blue eyes that will alter what she sees, and how others see her.

Pecola Breedlove's false perception in which she acquires bright blue eyes and transcends into a state of madness results from the 1940's prejudiced society that repudiates those that don't identify with the standard of beauty. Pecola's change of mind occurs after she meets with Soaphead Church, a reader, adviser, and interpreter of dreams who takes advantage of young girls. When Pecola pays him a visit asking for blue eyes, he deceives her by telling her

to feed poisoned meat to a dog near the porch. He concedes to Pecola that if the dog reacts unnaturally, which it ultimately does, she has been granted her wish of blue eyes. Pecola expresses to a made up friend that she has blue eyes and worries that “even if my eyes are bluer than Joanna’s and bluer than Michelena’s and bluer than that lady you saw, suppose there is somebody way off somewhere with bluer eyes.” (Morrison, 202) Pecola is convinced that everyone around her, including Mrs. Breedlove and her imaginary friend, is jealous of her blue eyes. While Claudia and Frieda learn to see themselves through their own eyes, Pecola “internalizes white standards, and in order to be accepted, she too makes an adjustment. Her adjustment, however, has detrimental effects that lead to her doom.” Pecola’s adjustment “involves an impossible transformation from an abject black girl to a valued, beautiful white girl with dazzling blue eyes.”(Roye, 220) Pecola becomes even more alienated from both white society and black society. She exists in the image created by the racist society as she descends into a state of insanity. Pecola Breedlove’s descent to insanity is a result of white and black obsession with whiteness as the standard that defines beauty.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison explores young black girls interactions and exposure to cultural backlash of the black female appearance in the 1940’s. Delving into the white dominance that instills self-hatred and inferiority within the female characters in the novel, Morrison illuminates the heavy influence of white culture. Young black girl perception and self-perception, as shown in Pecola Breedlove, is obliterated from a drastically young age. The pervasiveness of whiteness as the only form of beauty promoted through billboards, movies, and dolls develops negative conceptions of the black girl: invisibility, ugliness, abjection, worthlessness. Morrison’s focus on their continual destruction reveals the deeply flawed society that upholds racist and sexist ideology. In doing so, Morrison initiates an incentive for action

against the manipulative construct that creates a self-hating, self-destructive black community controlled by white superiority.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Pan Books, 1990. Print.

Mbalia, Doreatha Drummond. "The Bluest Eye: The Need for Racial Approbation." In *Toni Morrison's Developing Class Consciousness*, pp. 28-38. Selinsgrove, Mass.:Susquehanna University Press, 1991.

Roye, Susmita. Toni Morrison's Disrupted Girls and Their Disturbed Girlhoods: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*. *Callaloo* 35.1 (2012): 212-27. Web.