

Same Color, Different Fates: On the Themes in *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract: In her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison tells the tragic fate of a black girl named Pecola Breedlove. Simultaneously, the healthy life of the narrator, another black girl called Claudia, is also presented in the story. Though they are black-skinned, their fates are totally different. By exploring the causes, this paper aims to reveal the major themes embodied in this work: the white voice is inappropriate to dictate the contours of African-American life and it is their ethnic culture that can bring them a better future.

Keywords: *The Bluest Eye*, Themes, Self-identity, Ethnic Culture

1. Introduction

For African-American writers the novel has been an important vehicle to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racism as well as social injustice. Being the first black writer who won the Noble Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison has acknowledged the importance attached to the reclamation of an identity and a voice in black writing. During her literary career, Morrison once mentioned in *LeClair*, “My work bears witness and suggests who the outlaws were, who survived under what circumstances and why”^[1].

The Bluest Eye is one of her representative works which centers on the impact of the white mainstream culture on the self-identity and fate of African Americans. For several centuries black people were treated as the “Other” and their self-identity was racialized in the sense that they were objectified. Consequently, many of them suffered a tragic end, like the black girl Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. On the other hand, there were still some African Americans like Claudia in the same story who survived within the prevailing ideology of white supremacy, to which many critics paid no or few attentions. Thus, by analyzing two different fates of Pecola and Claudia in *The Bluest Eyes* and exploring the causes behind it, this paper aims to reveal the major themes of this work: the white voice is inappropriate to dictate the contours of African-American life and it is their ethnic culture that can bring them a better future.

2. The Breakdown of Pecola

Pecola in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eyes* is a lonely and unloved eleven-year-old girl who lives in a poor household with her continually fighting parents. As what Taylor argues, “a white dominated culture has racialised beauty in that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white people are more likely to have”^[2], little Pecola believes that she is ugly. Obviously, this belief is not born with but constructed. Pecola’s image of herself as “ugly” is first imposed by her mother Pauline Breedlove, who has been deeply eroded by the mainstream culture. Pauline Breedlove formed her idea of absolute physical beauty in the movies starred by white celebrities. Seeing the beautiful world presented in the films where “white men, taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with the bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet”^[3] Pauline feels self-contempt since she is aware that she will never have such kind of life and will never live up to the standards of white beauty. After receiving such kind of “education” from the movies, Pauline starts categorizing people based on physical beauty and treating them accordingly. Pacola, her own daughter, is even classified as ugly, “I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly”^[3]. Thus, when Pacola inadvertently enters the white home and frightens the daughter of the owner, a little pink-and-yellow girl, it is not surprising to find that her mother punishes her but comfort the white girl. Nursed by a mother with self-hatred, little Pecola develops a strong inferiority due to her alleged “ugliness” and denies her self-identity as a black.

Later in her life Pecola's feeling of her "ugliness" is reinforced by her teachers, schoolmates, a white shop-assistant and some members from the community. In the school, Pecola's teachers rarely glance at her and "She was the only one member of her class who sat alone at a double desk" ^[3]. For her schoolmates if someone wants to insult a boy, he will say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!" ^[3] and it will never fail to arouse great anger from the accused. Besides, when Pecola goes to a store to buy candies, she sees disgust and anger from the white shop-assistant's eyes, and firmly believes that the distaste must be for her, for her ugliness. Thus, as Pecola holds the money toward him, "he hesitates, not wanting to touch her hand" ^[3]. Collins remarks that in American society there is a division of Afro-Americans into two categories: the "Brights" and the "Lesser Blacks". People of darker skin are considered inferior whereas lighter-skinned blacks are preferred by institutions controlled by whites ^[4]. In *The Bluest Eye*, Maureen Peal and Geraldine are light-skinned blacks who regard themselves as superior to people of darker skin. The former reinforces Pecola's feeling of "ugliness" by calling herself cute and Pecola "black and ugly", while the latter scolding Pecola "you nasty little black bitch" ^[3].

Denied by her mother, teased by her schoolmates and despised by community members, Pecola is unable to maintain the ethnic culture of blacks, but internalizes the ideals of the dominating white race and forgets her identity on them. At the end of the story, she is driven insane by her strong desire to have blue eyes as the whites do. Pecola's tragedy reveals that the white voice is inappropriate to dictate the contours of African-American life.

3. The Survival of Claudia

Unlike Pecola devoured by the white culture, Claudia, the young narrator of the story, challenges the values of the dominant culture and condemns the American concept of blonde beauty as one of "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought" ^[3]. Claudia grows up in a poor but warm home where her parents have shown love and respect to their children. When Claudia is sick, her mother takes good care of her, tucking her in at night; when Frieda, Claudia's sister, is sexually abused by Mr. Henry, her father shows his anger by throwing a tricycle at Mr. Henry and kicking him off the porch. Besides, hearing her mother singing the blues at home, Claudia finds that misery colored by the greens and blues in her mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left Claudia with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. In fact, the blues sung by her mother do not simply serve her as the source of the spiritual strength. More importantly, it allows Claudia to form a better understanding about black culture and values. Then, as Moses says, the cultural values and knowledge embodied in the blues and transmitted orally to Claudia enable her to develop a black aesthetic ^[5].

Having absorbed the ethnic culture of blacks, Claudia develops a proper self-identity and values her blackness, which not only inspires other black to walk out of the traditional ideology but also provides them a way to quest for their self-identity. Therefore, she refuses to accept the values of the white society and does not adore western standards of beauty which makes Pecola its scapegoat. At the beginning of the novel, Claudia admits that she is indifferent to both white dolls and Shirley Temple which symbolize the white dominated culture. As black children, Claudia and her sister Frieda celebrate their differences and their blackness. A sense of pride towards their own race takes root in their mind. They feel comfortable in their dark skins, enjoy the news that their senses released to them, admire their dirt and cultivate their scars. She also realizes that she does not really hate light-skinned Maureen, and that Maureen is not worthy of hatred because she is not the enemy. "The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" ^[3]. The "Thing" absolutely includes the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalized, a standard that favors the light-skinned Maureen and destroys the black and ugly Pecola.

Compared with Pecola who leads a tragic life, Claudia survives underneath the white civilization not only because of the warmth and respect provided by her parents, but more significantly, the ethnic culture embraced and valued by her. Claudia's life experience reveals the theme that it is the ethnic culture of Blacks that ensures African Americans a chance to survive and bring them a better future.

4. Conclusion

In American society and literature black-skinned people have been objectified as well as treated and portrayed as the "Other" and negative stereotypes like physical ugliness have imposed on them. Consequently, many Afro-Americans gradually internalized the stereotypes and came to believe they

were inferior, “ugly” and then developed self-hatred, like the black girl Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. On the other hand, there were still some African Americans, just like Claudia in the same story, who challenged the values of the white society and embraced the ethnic culture, and finally they survived. As one of the spokesmen of black people, Morrison has always been focusing on such problems as black’s self-awareness, especially black women’s, their search for independence and self-identity under the double oppression of sexism and racism in her works. By telling the story of two black girls with different fates, Morrison succeeded in conveying the themes that the white voice is inappropriate to dictate the contours of African-American life and it is their ethnic culture that can bring them a better future.

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