All of us...felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us....We were not strong, only aggressive; we were not free, merely licensed; we were not compassionate, we were polite; not good, but well behaved....We substituted good grammar for intellect; we switched habits to simulate maturity; we rearranged lies and called it truth, seeing in the new pattern of an old idea the Revelation and the Word.
Chapter 1

Black is Not Beautiful:
The Tragedy of Colour in The Bluest Eye

The Bluest Eye tells the traumatic tale of Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who quests desperately for blue eyes in the hope that their acquisition will bring her the beauty and love that have always eluded her. Unable to accept the fact that she will always have black eyes, Pecola begins the long and painful journey to self deception and - ultimately - madness by convincing herself that she has been granted a pair of lovely blue eyes. She imagines that she is now the envy of every girl in town - especially her old self with its ugly black eyes. Why does an eleven-year-old girl wish to change her features so drastically - to exchange dark for light, black for white or black for blue? What are the terrible historical and social events that have led up to this level of frustration and disillusionment in a tender, innocent mind? How far are the individuals who compose and inhabit a racist society responsible for the creation, predicament and tragedy of thousands of Pecolas the world over? These are some of the questions that are explored in the first half of this chapter which also provides an episodic reading of The Bluest Eye to show how children first become aware of their class, colour and
social status, and what effect this race-consciousness has on their development as individuals. The last few paragraphs examine *The Bluest Eye* and the characterisation of Pecola in terms of literary technique to support the study's secondary focus on Morrison's creation of race-conscious characters who can be viewed as contemporary versions of classical tragic heroines.

*The Bluest Eye* opens with an extract from a primer which describes the ideal American home: a beautiful house and a complete family consisting of Mother, Father, Dick, Jane, a cat, a dog and a friend. By using this primer as a preface, and lines of it as chapter headings later, Morrison effectively frames the story of black Pecola against that of white Jane, and suggests through it the stark differences between the life-styles of these two girls. Jane is privileged and lucky. She has parents who look after her emotional and material needs. A cat, dog and friend are the accessories, so to say, that complete her little world - a world she will probably never peep out of to see the likes of Pecola. The primer, in short, describes a home - Pecola lives in a dilapidated structure that cannot even be called a house. The primer details the security and joy of family life - Pecola is insecure and unhappy in her domestic life - raped by her father and looked upon with suspicion and mistrust by her mother. The two people who are
supposed to cherish and shelter her are ultimately as responsible for her tragic fate as society itself. Donald M. Gibson writes that "the implication of the novel's structure is that our lives are contained within the framework of the values of the dominant culture and subjected to those values. We have all...internalised those values, and...we are instruments of our own oppression. The text says we are oppressed by the values of the ruling class; the countertext says we participate in our own oppression usually to the extent of being the very hand or arm of that oppression."^ Gibson rightly points out that even though it appears that the majority culture is the direct oppressor of the members of the minority, it is in fact the absorption and dissemination of dominant values by the minor sub-culture that causes the most harm to the victim. This can best be observed in the case of Pecola who is viewed as ugly by other black people rather than by whites - a prime example of what is termed as secondary racism in the introduction to this thesis.

Morrison introduces Pecola as the product of a broken home. Her Father Cholly Breedlove is in jail. Her mother Pauline and brother Sammy are staying with different families, and she herself has been put up with the MacTeers by a social worker.

The MacTeer family consists of Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer, and their daughters - Claudia - the nine-year-old narrator, and ten-year-old Frieda. Claudia's narration begins the first chapter. Her words and observations reveal her awareness of the class differences between African Americans like herself and European Americans like the Villanuccis - their next-door neighbours. Rosemary Villanucci is privileged - like Jane. Her family owns a new car, and as she sits there eating bread and butter she tells Claudia and Frieda that they cannot come in. The rolled up windows of the car symbolise a life-style that is out of reach of the MacTeers - an elite world from which they are excluded because of their race. They resent this ostracism because it hurts their pride and throws their depravation back in their faces. "We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, put red marks on her white skin...." (The Bluest Eye 5). Rosemary's smug expression comes from an awareness of the fact that she is rich and privileged, and much better off than her African American neighbours. Claudia and Frieda crave for the

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bread that she is eating, but the desire to mar her white skin is far greater because they realise that it is colour, rather than material prosperity, that is more responsible for her fortune and their misfortune. The same impulse later leads Claudia to dismember precious white dolls - supposedly the most coveted gift a child can get.

All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured....I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable.... Remove the cold and stupid eye-ball,...take off the head, shake out the sawdust...The gauze back would split, and I could see the disk with six holes, the secret of the sound. A mere metal roundness. (14)

Keith Byerman writes that “the doll is an emblem of a manipulative, inverted order. Adults and children are encouraged to believe that this combination of wood, cloth and metal is an idealization of girlhood and that the noise it makes is a human cry.” Because she has been thus taught, Claudia wants to dismantle white baby dolls to reach the heart of the matter - to delve deep into white plastic to see if there is something real or

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magical inside that gives the doll this overwhelming popularity, and makes it such a sought after model of ideal girlhood. On taking it apart, however, she finds that it is made up of ordinary plastic and fitted with a round metal disc inside which accounts for the sound. In the same way, white girls are also made up of the same blood, bones and voice-box that other children are made up of. The whiteness of their skin, however, lends popularity to them, and they are adored and appreciated by teachers and parents alike. Claudia wants to "dismember" them too.

But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. To discover what eluded me: The secret of the magic they weaved on others. What made people look at them and say, "Awwww," but not for me? (15)

In Claudia's eyes white girls are just as detestable as white dolls because they are appreciated only for the "beauty" that arises out of their whiteness. The objective of the violence that she directs toward both is twofold: an attempt to assuage the curiosity of a young mind (is there really something "magical" inside that
accounts for this awesome popularity) as well as to somehow punish the racist society they symbolise. Her childhood is torn apart by the politics of colour - leading to a prejudice she cannot even begin to understand. Everything in the world, it seems, is tailored to the needs of white people - dolls and ice-cream parlours, schools and playgrounds. Even dignity and desire appear to be exclusive domains of the racially "superior."

While Claudia's race-consciousness leads to a detestation of all that is white, however, Pecola's leads to self hatred and the usual desire for those blue eyes that hold all the promises of beauty and love in their unfathomable depths.

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, 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, Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes....Morning-glory-blue-eyes. Alice-and-Jerry- blue-storybook-
eyes. Each night, without fail, she prayed
for blue eyes.... (34-35)

Barbara Christian philosophises that “this simple theme, the desire of a black girl for blue eyes, is a real and symbolic statement about the conflict between the good and the beautiful of two cultures and how it affects the psyche of the people within those cultures. The theme...is complicated by the psychopolitical dominance of one culture over another....Pecola’s desire is more than the result of her own personal story. It encompasses three hundred years of unsuccessful interface between black and white culture.”

Christian rightly asserts that Pecola’s extraordinary desire has its roots in the age-old conflict between the races. She is not just one individual aspiring to a dominant culture’s standard of beauty. She represents, rather, the historical inability of two communities to agree upon a definition of beauty and worthiness that does not exclude members of any particular group. Pecola’s upbringing and exposure have been such that she blames everything on what she thinks is her ugliness arising out of the black colour of her skin, hair and eyes. The repeated references to eyes here suggest that Morrison is trying to depict a culture that lays stress on physical beauty - features that can be seen and appreciated -

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rather than felt or sensed. Society uses its condemning eyes to look upon Pecola, and finds her wanting. This society is symbolised by Mr. Yacobowski, whose store she visits to buy her favourite Mary Jane candies. He does not treat her like an esteemed customer at all, looking at her with disdain and distaste instead.

How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper... see a little black girl? She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge somewhere in the bottom lid is distaste... The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (36-37)

In the eyes of the white world, Pecola is invisible because she is black. The storekeeper does not need her business or patronage. Being racially inferior, and materially poor, she does not exist for him at all. It is no wonder then that she cannot coherently communicate to Mr. Yacobowski that she wants the Mary Janes. His incomprehension of her need symbolises not only society's
inability to understand her desperate wish for blue eyes, but also its failure to grasp and analyse the reasons that have lead to this frantic wish.

Pecola eats the Mary Janes not so much for the taste of the candy itself, but because she is attracted to the picture of the blond, blue-eyed girl on the wrapper. This is similar to her drinking out of the Shirley Temple mug - not because of any fondness for milk but because to sip from it is somehow to absorb and radiate the beauty of Shirley Temple - a beauty that will make her feel accepted and loved by society. Karla Alwes suggests that "the Mary Jane candies, like the Shirley Temple cup, offer Pecola an identity, but one that can only be achieved through the usurpation of herself."5 Pecola's craving for the Mary Janes marks a devaluation of her self, and points to her desire to become like the blond, blue-eyed Mary Jane. This feat can, however, be accomplished only if she negates her own personality and erases her looks as they are now: "to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane" (38). If she becomes a little white Mary Jane she can no longer be the little black Pecola she now is. She must internalise the whiteness of America at the cost of

banishing from her being the blackness of Africa. Her willingness to
go to any extent to get blue eyes shows also her willingness to go to
any extent to be accepted and loved by society.

Though Pecola and Claudia go to the same school and, for the
most part, encounter the same kind of people, their reactions to
similar situations are entirely different. Where Claudia responds
violently to every act of racism or discrimination, Pecola does not
react at all - except to pray for blue eyes. Life, for Claudia and
Frieda is bitter-sweet because they have their family's love and
support - no matter how shrouded in scoldings and whippings.
As a grown-up, Claudia recalls those days, and changes her
opinion about them.

But was it really like that? As painful as I
remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a
productive and fructifying pain....in the night,
when my coughing was dry and tough, feet
padded into the room, hands repinned the
flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a
moment on my forehead. So when I think of
autumn, I think of somebody with hands who
does not want me to die. (7)

This assurance of love helps to sustain Claudia through traumatic
times. To Michael Awkward this passage suggests "Claudia's
rejection of white evaluative standards vis-à-vis Afro-American life...her childhood, formerly conceived in a vocabulary of pain...has been reconceptualized as filled with [the] protective love of a mother." Claudia is fortunate - not only because she has parents who care for her, but also because she recognises that love for what it is, and is able to draw sustenance from it. The above passage demonstrates that she rejects the unattainable idealism of the primer and seeks comfort in the reality of her circumstances. For Pecola, however, life is bitter all the way because she has to bear the brunt of being black and poor - without familial support of any kind. She wishes that she could just disappear from the face of the earth - part by ugly part. Lying in her own house, and having just witnessed an explosive quarrel between her parents, she prays to God to make her disappear.

Pecola covered her head with the quilt "Please, God," she whispered into the palm of her hand "please make me disappear."...Little parts of her body faded away....Her fingers went,...then her arms,...Her feet...The legs....Her stomach....Then her chest, her neck....Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always

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left. Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. (33)

Pecola is able to imagine that all the parts of her body composed of black skin have faded away, but her eyes always remain. Even her imagination is not strong or powerful enough to make them disappear because they symbolise the permanence of her blackness. She knows that as long as they do not turn blue, she will remain an ugly little black girl in a beautiful white world, and discrimination and prejudice will hound her always. Since she does not have the strength that Claudia draws from her family, she breaks down completely under the twin pressures of racism and prejudice, which surround her from all sides - domestic as well as societal.

Claudia, on the other hand, learns from her experiences - grows, develops, and is even able to philosophise later in life.

When I learned how repulsive this disinterested violence was...my shame floundered about for refuge. The best hiding place was love. Thus the conversion from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love. It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in
cleanness, knowing even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement (15-16)

As Claudia grows older, she learns to adjust to her circumstances, to view her situation with a sense of irony and humour. She realises that childish acts like dismembering dolls and hating Shirley Temple will not bring an end to her victimisation. Though she does not exactly resign to her fate, she learns to compromise and accept, to a certain extent, some aspects of the majority culture without subscribing blindly to the values they represent. Mrs. MacTeer's practical, no-nonsense approach to life, her lack of self pity and the ability to burst into song at odd moments also enables Claudia to have an optimistic view of life. Pecola's family, on the other hand, is prey to the worst possible combination: material poverty, internal discord, and physical ugliness, all of which lead to self hatred.

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, "You are ugly people." They had looked about themselves and saw support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance
Morrison suggests that the Breedloves think that they are ugly because they are constantly exposed to white society's standards of beauty and popularity, and judged by the values of the dominant culture - with the result that they begin to feel ugly and despised. Billboards depict beautiful light-skinned models, the movies have for their heroines blue-eyed blondes like Shirley Temple and Jean Harlow, and the very glances (both black and white) that appreciate these epitomes of beauty and virtue fall with disdain on the likes of Pecola. To make matters worse, her parents contribute just as much to the trauma of her life as the standards set by white society. Her mother views her as ugly and therefore useless; her brother pays no attention to her, and her father ultimately turns to her with lust instead of love. Failing death, which evades her, she has no choice except to pray again and again for blue eyes. She looks within herself to see what makes her ugly just as Claudia dismembers white dolls to see what makes them beautiful.

Claudia, Frieda and Pecola's consciousness of their own depravity and ugliness is highlighted and intensified by the coming of Maureen Peal - a light skinned, wealthy, "pretty" new girl - to their school. Frieda and Claudia approach the situation
with mixed emotions of amusement, resentment and envy, but Pecola's reaction is entirely different.

Frieda and I were bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her....we were secretly prepared to be her friend...but I knew it would be a dangerous friendship, for when my eye traced the white border pattern of those Kelly-green knee socks, and felt the pull and slack of my brown stockings, I wanted to kick her. And when I thought of the unearned haughtiness in her eyes, I plotted accidental slammings of locker doors on her hand. (48-49)

Claudia's violent reactions toward white dolls and white girls are now re-directed toward Maureen Peal. Both sisters, however, take the situation in stride even though they are aware of the materially poor quality of their own life as compared to hers. They look for little flaws in her appearance, make vicious plans behind her back, and even call her names on occasion - but do not break down as Pecola does after her encounter with Maureen.

When Maureen runs away screaming, "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!" (56). Claudia and Frieda shout the final insult at her disappearing back, "Six-finger-dog-tooth-meringue-pie!" (57).
Pecola’s reaction is, however, entirely different: she “seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing. Her pain antagonized me. I wanted to...force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets. But she held it in where it could lap up into her eyes”(57).

At least Claudia and Frieda have the satisfaction of insulting Maureen and arguing away their irritation with her. Pecola, however, cannot unleash the feelings that are inside her, and shrinks back into the shell of ugliness she has created around herself. As opposed to this hurtful acceptance of her situation, Claudia and Frieda try to rationalise on their way home.

We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. If she was cute...then we were not....We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what?....And all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not the Enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us. (57-58)

Even in the midst of such hurt and anger, Claudia and Frieda realise that Maureen Peal is just a scapegoat. As an individual, she cannot be blamed for being traditionally beautiful and popular, and
for viewing them as ugly. Morrison implies here that her physical features are not important in themselves, but their cultural significance is of utmost consequence. It is not Maureen's fault that she is light-skinned, has long hair, or looks a certain way. The blame lies with the people - both black and white, teachers and parents - who appreciate a certain kind of look over another, and allow it to prejudice their perception of an individual. The real culprit, by implication, therefore, is a society conditioned by values of the dominant culture which it shamelessly passes on to both black and white members - without caring about the consequences.

Perhaps the most traumatic of all experiences for Pecola occurs in Geraldine's house. She is tortured by Junior, and wrongly accused and insulted by Geraldine who takes pride in her light colour, her neat home, and her pristine, false life. This episode is also important because it convinces Pecola that she can have blue eyes in a black body - like the cat. It does not take Geraldine long to stereotype Pecola, to typecast her into a pre-existing mould of prejudice and hatred.

She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart.

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shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything....The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. (71-72)

Geraldine is one of those women who have deliberately initiated themselves into white society and adopted its culture and norms. Her family tree is of the hybrid variety - composed of black ancestors who mated with members of the white population to lighten their skin colour and produce offspring like herself and her son Junior. Awkward explains that “Pecola is everything that Geraldine is fighting to suppress. She is, for Geraldine, ‘funk,’ shadow, the blackness of blackness.” Geraldine shows deliberate hatred and cruelty toward Pecola because of her own complexes - because Pecola stands there as a model of what she herself would have been like had she not tried so hard to obliterate all signs of blackness from her being. She also reacts so contemptuously because it gives her a chance to show off in front of the less privileged girl, and assert her superiority over someone darker and poorer than herself. Instead of looking at Pecola with compassion and sympathy, she reacts violently and with intense hatred -
further proving the point that black society is just as responsible as white society for the predicament that Pecola and thousands of others like her find themselves in.

Though some of their experiences are different from Pecola’s, something or the other always reminds Frieda and Claudia that they are disadvantaged and underprivileged. Whatever road they decide to take, wherever they decide to go, the contrasts between black, coloured and white life-styles are only too evident. This fact sinks in when the two sisters go to see Pecola at the house where her mother works.

We walked down tree-lined streets of soft gray houses leaning like tired ladies....Then came brick houses set well back from the street, fronted by yards edged in shrubbery....The lakefront houses were the loveliest....The orange-patched sky of the steel-mill section never reached this part of town. This sky was always blue. (81)

Claudia’s observation shows that both poverty and wealth are visible - and clearly divided. Just as the smoke and pollution from the industrial area does not invade the blue umbrella of sky over these houses, so the families that live there do not interact with

8 Awkward 79.
the disadvantaged sections of society. Claudia and Frieda's realisation of this fact makes them even more conscious of class differences between people, and aware of how low a rung they occupy on the societal ladder. When they pass Lake Shore Park, they look longingly at it because black people are not allowed in it. They feel the injustice of a ban based entirely on colour and status - but cannot do anything about it.

In the Fisher house Pecola, Claudia and Frieda see a little girl who is everything they are not: white, pretty and rich. She makes them even more aware of their own colour, ugliness, and poverty. When Pecola overturns the pie by mistake, Pauline's wrath falls on her. The hurtful words uttered by her mother scorch her more deeply than the hot insides of the pie. Unwanted even by her own mother, held up for comparison and contrast with the doll-like, pampered child, her inadequacies surface again, and her self-esteem reaches an all time low.

Morrison depicts Pauline as a woman who mercilessly neglects her own house and family - but shows also that there is a class and race related reason behind it. The move from Kentucky to Ohio with Cholly after their marriage, is disastrous for Pauline. She feels uncomfortable and out of place among the white and coloured people here: "everything changed....I weren't used to so
much white folks....they was everywhere...and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too....No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count...." (91). Pauline is an outsider here because she is black - and aware of it. She knows that people look down on her because of the colour of her skin. What makes matters worse is that she does not feel at ease even in the company of other black and coloured women.

Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes. (92)

The values that other black women judge Pauline by are essentially white values - straight hair, specific make-up, a certain way of talking. When held up against these ideals, she is naturally lacking - just as her daughter Pecola is found wanting of the ingredients of beauty. Morrison shows the incongruity inherent in a black woman's attempts to recreate herself in an image of whiteness by using materials that are all wrong for her.
This theme recurs in *Song of Solomon* where Hagar plasters her face with make-up made specifically for white women, and begins to look ridiculous instead of "beautiful." As Pauline's feelings of loneliness and alienation become stronger, she starts going to the movies - the only place where she feels really happy. She gets lost in a world of beauty and romance - both of which have been denied her because of her colour. It is significant to note here that women like Pauline and Hagar are themselves responsible for their fate too. They allow themselves to be completely overwhelmed by the dominant world view instead of questioning, fighting or even rejecting it as Claudia and (with much more aggression and intensity) Pilate do.

Along with the idea of romantic love she was introduced to another - physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap. She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category on the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale
was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen.... (95)

The movies are Pauline's introduction to a glamorous and ideal white society - the concepts of beauty and love - judged and classed by white standards hold up her own life for poor contrast, comparison - and criticism. Physical beauty for her now is Jean Harlow whom she tries to imitate in dress and style. It is not very long, however, before the absurdity of the situation dawns on her because there is absolutely nothing that she has in common with Jean Harlow - neither colour nor figure nor fortune. Morrison both confirms that the mass media propagates the dominant myth, and reiterates how ridiculous it is that society should hold up for emulation only one type of an ideal which is not representative of the entire population, and therefore remains an unattainable goal for many - leading to feelings of dejection and depression. Alwes theorises that "in the darkness of the theater, where no one can see her face, Pauline Breedlove seeks the same type of magic...that her daughter had hoped to achieve by 'disappearing.' Pauline can disappear in the theater....The darkness of the theater provide[s] the opportunity for her to feel a part of an otherwise alien world."9 Just as Pecola thinks that the acquisition of blue eyes will bring love and acceptance, Pauline
feels, ironically, that by dissolving into the blackness of the theatre, she will somehow become part of the glorious whiteness that it both represents and propagates.

Because of this acculturation into the movies, and judging by white standards, Pauline finds her baby, Pecola, ugly and wanting beauty. She calls her a "cross between a puppy and a dying man" (98), and shows no interest in her. Ignoring her own family, she goes willingly to work for a white family who, she feels, truly appreciates her worth. In their little, white daughter, she finds the "beauty" Pecola lacks and she herself craves. In their neat, organised, luxurious house, she finds all the assets her own lacks. To these "beautiful," rich people, she gives all the love, care and attention her own family desperately needs. "She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all of her needs....soon she stopped trying to keep her own house" (98-99). Pauline's own standard of living falls short of the style and plenty she sees in the white household, and Pecola is like a poor Raggedy Anne when compared to the sweet, cuddly baby-doll-like Fisher girl, so she feels that her time and energy would only be wasted at the storefront. Another advantage of working for affluent whites is that she actually develops an identity and a certain

"Alwes 99."
amount of self-esteem because of it. "The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers....Power, praise, and luxury were hers in this household" (99). Morrison shows how society treats people according to status - and what difference wealth and position make to one's self-esteem and standing. Pauline is compelled to draw attention to her Fisher connection in her daily transactions - because without white patronage she stands nowhere in society. As a minority, she has no voice or authority of her own and must constantly refer to an essentially white association in order to gain the credibility that ought to come naturally to a citizen of the country. It is deplorable that as a black woman her existence is nullified unless white support validates her presence and actions. Pauline never takes the Fisher part of her personality back to her own storefront house. "Pauline kept this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world, and never introduced it into her storefront, or to her children" (100). She feels that her nurturing traits are not worth demonstrating to her black and ugly family so, like precious jewels, she shields them from its view, and unveils them only before the admiring blue eyes of the white Fisher family.

The result of this neglect is felt most strongly by Pecola
whose painful consciousness of being black and ugly, as well as the desire for blue eyes ultimately takes her to Soaphead Church - a self-proclaimed wish fulfiller. She voices her wish simply, directly - as far as her eyes are concerned, "I want them blue" (138). Soaphead is taken aback, though he can understand her need.

He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was an ugly little girl asking for beauty....Of all the wishes people had brought him...this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfilment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. (138)

It is ironic that only a jerk like Soaphead can understand this crying need for blue eyes - the circumstances that must have brought Pecola to him, and the cruelty of a society that allows discrimination and prejudice to thrive uninterrupted in the very midst of civilisation. This does not, however, prevent him from utilising her to poison Bob the dog. Like everyone else, he too takes advantage of Pecola but does not want to be responsible for her well-being. Though Soaphead thinks he understands her
craving for blue eyes, and sympathises with her situation, he is not much different from her father who decides to show his “love” for her by raping her on the kitchen floor. Too young to understand the implications of this act, and too emotional to comprehend the consequences for the victim, only Claudia and Frieda want Pecola’s baby to live.

I thought about the baby that everybody wanted dead, and saw it very clearly. It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O’s of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth...I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley temples, and Maureen Peals. (149)

Claudia visualises a baby who will be born black - like them. It will have black, “woolly” hair instead of golden curls falling over a white forehead. The eyes will be black instead of blue, the nose wide, and the lips - thick and dark. She, however, speaks of these features as desirable, and imbues them with positive qualities (“clean black,”
“kissing-thick,” “silk of black skin...”), whereas universally accepted “beautiful” white features are spoken of with contempt (“synthetic yellow,” “pinched nose”). A newer generation is about to begin, and Claudia wishes, perhaps, that the dark beauty with which it will be endowed will have a chance to be appreciated or, at least, accepted by the nation to which she belongs. The death of Pecola's baby, however, suggests that the concept of black as beautiful has perished even before it could be born. Morrison hints, perhaps, that in spite of the thousands of Pecolas, and their stories, that exist in the world, contemporary society is not yet ready to accept anything other than a peaches and cream complexion as the ideal definition or standard of beauty. The dominant culture is neither willing to surrender its hegemony in favour of a more balanced approach, nor separate the concept of beauty from that of self-worth.

Does this mean that girls like Pecola, Claudia and Frieda will have to face rejection, disapproval and disappointment at every stage of their journey through life? Will their capabilities as individuals be undermined just because they sport the stamp of blackness in a society where being white and wealthy is like holding a passport to new worlds of possibility and opportunity? Pecola’s search for and inability to obtain blue eyes suggests that there are
several key aspects of material culture which continue to evade the less fortunate, and compel them to live in a state of unhappy delusion.

Through the pages of The Bluest Eye, Morrison has successfully demonstrated the damaging effects of race prejudice on African Americans - especially women and young girls. Though she begins by saying that one must "take refuge in how"(3) the book suggests that what is really important is not what Pecola wants (blue eyes), but why she wants them. The problem, therefore, is not of mere "beauty" or "looks" but of acculturation and initiation into a society that promotes, propagates and declares certain physical features as better than others, and judges harshly the people who fall short of them. In The Bluest Eye Morrison has highlighted the life of the black woman from all angles - housewife (Mrs. MacTeer), working woman (Geraldine and Pauline Breedlove), prostitute (China, Poland and the Maginot Line), and of course, the school-going girls Pecola, Claudia and Frieda. With the exception of the prostitutes, each tries, somehow or the other, to compensate for this unbearable blackness of being, and for each the need to be accepted by the majority culture is just as great as the need to be accepted by the minor sub-culture.

Though all three girls spend their growing up years together,
Pecola is most vulnerable to the hostile milieu surrounding their lives. Several factors account for this trauma. Unlike Claudia and Frieda, she does not have the warm and steady support of her family. Whereas Mr. MacTeer goes to the extent of throwing out the boarder who tries to paw Frieda, Cholly rapes his daughter. Mrs. MacTeer keeps vigil in the night to see if her children are sleeping peacefully, whereas Pauline showers all her love and affection on the Fisher girl - ignoring her own daughter completely.

The protective shield of a supportive family that surrounds the MacTeer sisters is conspicuous by its absence in Pecola's life. There is a yawning gap of insecurity where the cloak of safety ought to be - thus enabling the cold winds of hatred and prejudice to lash mercilessly at Pecola who is too weak to resist the cruel onslaught.

Though Morrison wishes her writing to be appreciated for its literary rather than sociological qualities, a book like *The Bluest Eye* is bound to raise questions about contemporary American

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10 Toni Morrison, “The One Out of Sequence,” Anne Koenen, *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 67-83. In this interview Morrison says, “I’m always a little disturbed by the sociological evaluations white people make of Black literature... I don’t think it is possible to discuss a literature without taking into consideration what is sociologically or historically accurate, but most of the criticism in this country stops here. It’s demoralizing for me to be required to explain Black life once again for the benefit of white people...” In another interview printed in the same collection, Morrison says, “Whenever you have any subject about women, even if it’s poetry, short stories, or whatever, half of it is always sociology or some other -ology before you get to simply see what is beautiful, and why, and what the criteria are, the criteria for that book” (Kathy Neustadt, “Toni Morrison and Eudora Welty” 86).
society, and the kind of values being passed on to the young multicultural generation now inhabiting the country. The author makes it a point to suggest that both blacks and whites are responsible for the creation and plight of the Pecolas of the world. Her work, however, maintains its aesthetic and literary merit even as it reflects the harsh reality of contemporary American society. Morrison moulds Pecola's character in such a way that she becomes, in her own right, a contemporary tragic heroine who undergoes traumatic experience due to an inherent tragic flaw, is transformed by it, but lives on instead of succumbing to death under the burden of adverse circumstances. Christian writes that "Pecola is the passive center of the novel, the one to whom things happen and whose only action, her prayer for and receipt of blue eyes renders her tragic. Her tragic flaw is her particular vulnerability and her generic ill-luck to be born black and female, to be born into the chasm between two cultures" (72)." Pecola's desire for blue eyes, and what she hopes to gain by their acquisition, symbolises the need of all minorities to be accepted by society, to be appreciated for what they are instead of how they look, and to be cared for and cherished by those close to them. By voicing this concern, she attains a certain universality, and rises above the level of the

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11 Christian 72.
individual to become more representative of humanity.

The Bluest Eye, ultimately, closes on a sad note. No catharsis takes place, and no balance is restored at the end. Claudia concludes that “this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s...much, much, much too late” (164). It is too late for black to blossom as beauty because Pecola’s baby has died. Contemporary American society - both black and white - cannot nurture and sustain a healthy minority culture because the weeds of racism and prejudice will kill the black saplings even before they can sprout. Awkward contends that “the planting of seeds...serves to demonstrate not nature’s harmony with humanity and the possibility of preserving...life, but, rather, a barren earth's indifference to humanity’s needs.”\(^{12}\) The general atmosphere of American society, it seems, is reflected in nature too. The majority culture is the apathetic, “barren earth” which does not even make an attempt to acknowledge or understand the subdued minority culture, let alone allow it to flourish. Though a majority of the critics tend to see The Bluest Eye as a novel of hopelessness, this

\(^{12}\) Awkward 91.
chapter seeks to assert in the end that the clouds of pessimism do have a silver lining which glimmers across the horizon in the figure of Claudia. A product of the same general milieu as Pecola, Claudia embodies the beginnings of individual selfhood and rebellion leading to reform. Her portrayal by Morrison does not allow foreclosure of the hope that young black seedlings will one day fight the earth and determine to sprout like Claudia instead of wilting away in desolation and madness like Pecola.