CHAPTER II

EFFECTS OF INTERNALIZED RACISM

- THE BLUEST EYE

Source: http://thebluesteyemyasiachaplin.weebly.com/index.html
We mistook violence for passion, indolence for leisure, and thought recklessness was freedom.

Source: http://www.azquotes.com/quote/481956
Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) makes one of the most powerful expressions on the relationship between western standards of female beauty and the psychological oppression of black women. When it was published it was not an instant success. It was out of print by 1974. Its reincarnation however has been triumphant. *The Bluest Eye* brought Toni Morrison to public notice. In her interview to Betty Jean Parker, Morrison remarks:

I wrote about a victim who is a child, and adults don’t write about children. The novel is about a passive kind of person and the people around her who create the kind of situation that she is in. I did not think that it would be widely distributed because it was about things that probably nobody was interested in except me. I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn’t know if such a book existed, but I had just never read it in 1964 when I started writing The Bluest Eye. (Guthrie ed. 61)

It is clear from Morrison’s comment that, even if she took six years to write the novel, she knew that she was dealing with a different theme as the content of her novel. Morrison recounts an anecdote that occurred when she was at school. In her conversation to Charles Ruas she clearly states how that anecdote became instrumental in providing her with the germ of the idea behind *The Bluest Eye*. She remarks:

I began to write that book as short story based on a conversation I had with a friend when I was a little girl. The conversation was about whether God existed; she said no and I said yes: She explained her
reason for knowing that He did not: she had prayed every night for two years for blue eyes and didn’t get them, and therefore He did not exist. What I later recollected was that I looked at her and imagined her having them and thought how awful that would be if she had gotten her prayer answered. I always thought she was beautiful. I began to write about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled; and also about the whole business of what is physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else, and yet part of all females who were peripheral in other people’s lives. (Ruas 95-96)

The comment makes it clear to the reader that while the genesis of the novel was an off-hand remark by a little black girl; its import was a very disturbing one, especially since it is uttered in a country that has supposedly overcome its racial bias. For Morrison, “the trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self” (Bloom ed. 214). Responding to a sense of absence and a lack of representations, The Bluest Eye is an imagined history of what it is to grow up black and female in the 1930s and 1940s, but there is another important way in which it responds to contemporary political movements – the way things were moving too fast in the early 1960s-70s. However self-affirming assertions such as ‘black is beautiful’ were in the 1960s and 70s, they were too simple to redress the complex and long-prepared effects of valuations based on colour. Focusing on the complex formations of subjectivity in a racialised country, Morrison’s first novel implicitly takes on assertions of racial pride – black is beautiful – and scrutinises the historical backlog of self-devaluation that such assertions cannot magically erase. Being published on the heels of the Black Power movement, *The Bluest Eye* remains a seminal work for its enlightened broaching of the subject of internalised racism
in the African American community’s notions of beauty and self worth. Morrison’s first fictional work can be seen as part of the agenda of establishing a politics of representation, which necessarily began, with the critique of ideals of “personal beauty and desirability informed by racist standards” (Hooks 34). Morrison through fictionalized narrative began what would become a lifelong examination of the social narrative resulting from African American’s experience of slavery and racism in the United States. The history in Morrison’s fictional texts include both – the effects of physical bondage and of the white supremacist ideas propagated globally and internalized by some African Americans – the mental and intellectual effects of the far reaching institution of slavery.

_The Bluest Eye_ opens with a sample of the idyllic ‘Dick and Jane’ primer. The primer acts as an ironic frame for the entire novel’s narrative.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bow wow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.” (Morrison 7)
This primer prose is immediately repeated two more times; a second time it is printed at a more accelerated speed, the words running together without punctuation and the third time the pace is frenzied. Each chapter is prefaced by fragments of the frenzied prose in order to continually remind the reader of the undeniable contrast between this pervasive white, middle class myth and the tragic dissolution of the novel’s central character, Pecola Breedlove and her family, who are incapable of attaining this dream myth.

…the initial presence of the children’s prose also assumes further significance as a guide post to the novel’s complex structure. Embedded within the prose are the novel’s three levels of narrative consciousness: the first level is the personal, idealised consciousness of childhood, as demonstrated by Pecola’s yearning for blue eyes; the second represents the less sedate, less naive consciousness of the novel’s central narrator, Claudia MacTeer, who, as an adult, recalls the ambivalence that the idyllic prose’s image creates; the third version provides the social/historical consciousness of the objective narrator who, by repeating the prose and exposing the contrast between the ideal and the real, offers the reader no escape from her anger at the dissolution of black lives. (Bjork 32)

Historically, against the backdrop of the Great Depression, many migrated in search of jobs and the characters of the novel come to Lorain, Ohio, for better living. The novel is set in a steel mill town in the 1940s. The events are not presented chronologically; instead, they are linked by the voices and memories of two narrators. In the sections labelled with name of a season, Claudia MacTeer’s retrospective narration as an adult contains her childhood memories
about what happened to Pecola. The other narrator, the omniscient narrator, then braids her stories into Claudia’s season sections, introducing influential characters and events that shape Pecola’s life. The lives of Claudia and her sister Frieda take an interesting turn when Pecola Breedlove is jailed for burning down their house. At MacTeers we come to know Pecola’s idealized consciousness, and significantly we learn of her object of desire and the symbolic perpetrator for the central conflict and incongruity of the novel:

Freida brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue – and – white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. Freida and [Pecola] had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. (19)

Like the Dick and Jane primer, Frieda and especially Pecola are attracted to the order and perfection of this manufactured image; it is an image that connotes myriad, contrived values including how a girl and /or woman should look, act, and even feel. Pecola’s extreme fondness for the cup also represents an indictment against the whole of a value system that has afflicted not only Pecola and her family, but an entire community. The Breedlove family soon comes together and finds a different home in an ugly house on the corner of a forgotten street. The second narrator offers us her memories of Pecola’s family. We see Pecola and her brother Sammy, bracing themselves for the ordeal of listening to their mother quarrelling violently with their drunken father, Cholly. Against the backdrop of grinding poverty, with her parents locked in an ugly cycle of hostility and violence, Pecola seeks hope in her prayers for beauty, which she feels will lead to her being loved. Each night, Pecola fervently prayed
for “blue eyes, sky-blue eyes”, thinking that if she looked different – pretty – perhaps everything would be better. Pecola’s desire for blue eyes “disturbs her ability to perceive and comprehend reality. It becomes an obsession with her and results in hallucination” (Singh 42). She does not accept reality and believes differently. Her ideal of the white romantic myth of blue eyes becomes palpable.

The Bluest Eye represents an indictment against the whole of a value system that has afflicted not only Pecola and her family, but an entire community. They are victims of the force of an alien culture and its manufactured image, …The Breedloves are the victims of a racist, class conscious society that has forced them to live unnatural lives. But while their lives have been battered by racism’s more tangible effects of extreme poverty and deprivation, the most insidious effects of racism as well as sexism are represented by the maliciousness of stereotypes. It is not only that the tragedy of Pecola and her family results in their loss of self-worth, but it more significantly becomes the catalyst for the abuse and violence that the family inflicts upon each other and that is further inflicted upon them by a community who themselves are caught up in the same futile circle of desire and denigration.” (Singh 42-43)

Pecola, who is just eleven years old, encounters racism, not just from white people, but mostly from her own race. In their eyes she is much too dark, and the darkness of her skin suggests that she is inferior, and according to everyone else, her skin makes her even uglier. Therefore, she fervently wishes to attain blue eyes in order to conquer this battle of self-hatred. She does not want just any shade of blue, but the bluest eyes. Morrison here describes a social situation
so distorted by the myth of whiteness that it produces in Pecola an unorthodox obsession of the blue-eyed beauty named Shirley Temple. George Frederickson in his critical analysis of nineteenth century America states “the racial ideal was of course lily-white” (Frederickson 132). The affect of the nineteenth century ideal continues to trickle down for generations, and this false ideal prompts Morrison to write the fictionalized account of Pecola Breedlove and her quest for beauty. Pecola’s experience, however, are not typical of all black girls who also have to grow up in a hostile society. Except for Claudia and Freida, Pecola has no friends. She is ridiculed by most of the other children and is insulted and tormented by black schoolboys because of her dark skin and coarse features. Even her own mother Pauline Breedlove fails to give her the comfort and mother’s love to protect her from her desperate situation. She herself becomes a victim of these social white norms of beauty. Her early years of marriage with Cholly are multicoloured. She describes her feelings as “laughing between my legs”. Her limp foot does not become a hurdle to her marriage to Cholly but on the contrary:

> While smiling to herself and holding fast to the break in sombre thoughts, she felt something tickling her foot. She laughed aloud and turned to see. The whistler was bending down tickling her broken foot and kissing her leg. She could not stop her laughter – not until he looked up at her and she saw the Kentucky sun drenching the yellow, heavy-lidded eyes of Cholly Breedlove. (91)

Barbara Rigney notes that Morrison’s female characters ‘have a mark which hints at their identities’ (39). As an adolescent, Pauline perceives herself as “mark(ed)” or deformed because of her foot. She suffers great embarrassment as
a result and gives herself reason to feel less than perfect. The wound caused by a rusty nail leaves her with “a crooked, archless foot that flopped when she walked” (88) thereby explaining for her many things that would have been otherwise incomprehensible. Pauline fantasizes about love and acceptance. Clearly she dreams about the presence of a man. She initially finds that with Cholly. But when they move to Lorain, slowly the housework is not enough. Pauline escapes from her frustrations to childhood fantasies by visiting movies. She feels special and accepted in the theatre:

The onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I’d go early, before the show started. They’d cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I’d move right on in them pictures … Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard and looking at Cholly hard. I’ member one time I went to see Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. I fixed my hair up like I’d seen hers on a magazine. A part on the side, with one little curl on my forehead. It looked just like her. (97)

Pauline experiences white world of glamour to find fulfilment. For her beauty becomes an ideal never to be achieved outside the movies. Anger takes over Pauline’s life and escalates after the birth of her daughter, Pecola. She sees her baby as ugly, certainly far from the ideal in glamorous movies:

So when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You knows who she is, but she don’t look the same …
A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly. (99-100)

Pauline resists seeing her own baby as beautiful because she has internalized the white standard of beauty as presented in film. Pauline “has diminished herself through her obsequious decision to whiteness, just as surely as little Pecola is diminished by her desire for blue eyes” (Rigney 44). After Pecola’s birth, Pauline avoids the black culture, transferring her anger from herself to her family and re-invents herself, “split[s]” herself in the home of a white couple.

She looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and loved all of it. The child’s pink nightie, the stacks of white pillow slips edged with embroidery, the sheets with top hems picked out with blue cornflowers. She became what is known as an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all her needs […]. Soon she stopped trying to keep her own house […]. More and more she neglected her house, her children, her man – they were like the after thoughts one has just before sleep, the early-morning and late-evening edges of her day, the dark edges that made the daily life with the Fishers lighter, more delicate, more lovely […]. Here her foot flopped around on deep pile carpets, and there was no uneven sound. Here she found beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise. (100-1)
Pauline fails as a mother and is unable to nurture feelings of self-worth in her daughter. Dissatisfied with the role of motherhood, Pauline carries it with resignation as a heavy cross and her “crown of thorns” is her drunken husband Cholly. Pecola’s parents do not know how to love and they cannot give their children a sense of self for they have none of their own. Unlike the MacTeers they fail to give her any moorings. Perhaps the seeds of her parent’s discontent lie in their own childhood experiences. Pauline as ninth of eleven children was ignored by her parents, who, in turn blames them for her limp foot. She is forced to baby-sit and run the house. Early in life she is introduced to do the duties of a woman which she performs with efficiency. Morrison very subtly shows how a girl’s childhood is bough down with womanhood, irrespective of age or biological maturity. It brings no gratification, only more work. Her inadequacies increase after her marriage. During her pregnancy she breaks her front tooth and this causes once again a blow to her beauty ideal.

There I was, five months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone. Everything went then. Look like I just didn’t care no more after that. I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly. (98)

Such disappointments lead Pauline to vent her anger on her children. Pecola becomes the victim of her parent’s disillusionment with life. She searches pathetically for self-esteem but without the nourishing support of her parents she cannot succeed. She also inherits her mother’s total acceptance of white standard of beauty and craves for not only the blue but the bluest of eyes. Here it is interesting to note that Pecola is an archetype of the black children in America courageous enough, though subliminally, to search for and to parse out
an identity that validates them. Some critics hold Pecola responsible for situation. That she could not have tried resistance when being raped by her own father. Indeed, whatever happens to her is tragic; however she is not to be blamed. As a literary representation of how African American children are taught the social and cultural advantages of whiteness, she is reminiscent of the children in Kenneth Clark’s infamous “doll study”. Clark says:

Black youngsters were shown automatically correct dolls with white and brown skin colors. I asked the children if they saw themselves in the dolls and, if so, to describe themselves … By using the white and brown dolls for comparison and as self-identifiers, the children articulated their sense of self image regarding race and color … The majority of them preferred the white dolls and rejected the brown dolls. (Clark 150)

The question remains why children preferred the white dolls? To which the answer lies in the theory, according to Hyman, that what these children understood implicitly was “social construct in which they lived favoured whiteness. Therefore play white and you are applauded, uplifted, placed indoors; play black and you are degraded, enslaved, put “outdoors” (Hyman 256). Pecola is a representation of Clark’s children. For Pecola, the blue eyes she yearns for are a surrogate for whiteness. In her young mind, whiteness avails entrance into a cultural hegemony that is affirmed and empowered. Whiteness makes her acceptable, the revelation for Pecola is that girls who look at the world through a brown lens are disenfranchised; they are not seen because for people like Mr. Yacobowski, the store keeper, “…there is nothing to see” (42). Pecola’s eyes do not create this conversation; it is forced on her by the
racists and oppressive environment that demonize her and name her “ugly”. The ugliness “… is a product not of [her] intrinsic inadequacy, but rather of the systematic reinforcement of a racial … criteria for full citizenship” (Gillian 2). This shield of ugliness helps her to endure oppression as she attempts to find a vision not shackled by disenfranchisement. In remaining with the tradition of Harriet Tubman:

Her yearning for blue eyes is simply a desire to be free of oppression by renaming herself; she wants what the African brought to America wanted: Freedom. Slavery was put on the African. Ugliness is put on Pecola. Like Tubman, who successfully hid from slavery as she travelled the Underground Railroad in order to secure her freedom and rename herself “Liberated woman.” Pecola uses the ugliness that seems to silence her as she seeks what she believes will make her free … (Hyman 258)

Her desire for bluest eyes deepens more and more after suffering physical and emotional abuse. In town she is brutally teased by the group of boys when she is unexpectedly saved by Claudia, Freida, and a new girl named Maureen Peal. Maureen is a beautiful light-skinned girl that becomes friendly towards Pecola for a while. However, Maureen soon turns on the girls, using her own beauty as a weapon against them. Pecola is also a victim of a cruel prank by a light-skinned boy named Louis Junior, who is resentful towards dark skinned blacks. Actually the people who care for Pecola in their own way are – Claudia, Freida, and Cholly. Cholly, father of Pecola, also had a difficult childhood. He was abandoned by his parents and taken in by his Aunty Jimmy. She dies when he is young and at her funeral he meets another girl. He takes her to a nearby
field. Their kissing is interrupted by two white hunters, who order Cholly to make love to the girl while they watch. Cholly shamed and humiliated, transfers this anger to the girl rather than the hunters.

Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. (119)

Cholly travels to Macon, Georgia in search of his natural father but after finding him, he becomes afraid to introduce himself. He runs away and lives a life of total freedom.

… Cholly was truly free. Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him. (126)

Cholly live a life of total freedom but is confused once he has children with Pauline. He is unable to understand how to love his children, and deals with this confusion by drinking. Paradoxically, this is a state that allows him to see Pecola more clearly than probably anyone else in the book (with the exception of the adult Claudia) and to love her in spite of what he sees, but does not allow him to interact with her in any other form other than “reactions based on what he felt at the moment” (127). One drunken night Cholly sees his daughter washing dishes and sees also, in her stooped frame, “an accusation” against
him. Unlike others in town, though, he sees “her young, helpless, hopeless presence” (127) and “loved her enough to touch her, envelope her, give something of himself to her” (159) where no one else would. When Pecola scratches her leg with her foot, it causes Cholly to remember when he first met his wife. The memory of tickling his wife’s foot, as well as his drunken state, becomes the factors which lead him to rape Pecola. Even the aftermath of the act leaves him with mixed feelings:

Cholly stood up and could see only her grayish panties, so sad and limp around her ankles. Again the hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her. (128-29)

Pecola wakes to her mother standing over her, unsympathetic and unforgiving of her daughter’s ugliness and blackness. This incident followed by Pecola’s inability to attend school now that she’s pregnant, causes her to visit Soaphead Church, “Reader, Adviser, and Interpreter of Dreams” (130). The request Pecola makes for blue eyes is so sincere that the Charlatan is moved:

A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him – money, love, revenge – seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfilment. (137)
Soaphead is angry at the God responsible for the imperfect universe he observes, and so exalts himself to the role of miracle worker. Anxious both to rid himself of his land-lady’s old dog Bob and provide Pecola with hope, he devises a plan. He sprinkles poison on some meat and gives Pecola the packet with explicit instructions:

Take this food and give it to the creature sleeping on the porch. Make sure he eats it. And mark well how he behaves. If nothing happens, you will know that God has refused you. If the animal behaves strangely, your wish will be granted on the day following this one. (138)

After Soaphead watches Bob writhe in a spasmodic death and Pecola run down the lane ebullient with expectation, he writes a letter to God, a letter which explains his love for fondling little girls and his refusal to view his actions as “dirty”. Then he justifies his treatment of Pecola:

You forgot, Lord. You forgot how and when to be God.

That’s why I changed the little black girl’s eyes for her, and I didn’t touch her; not a finger did I lay on her. But I gave her those blue eyes she wanted. Not for pleasure, and not for money. I did what You did not, could not, would not do: I looked at that ugly little black girl, and I loved her. I played You. And it was a very good show!

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue
heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after. I, I have found it meet and right so to do. (143)

The final section of the novel, “summer”, chronicles Pecola’s descent into madness. Convinced that she now possesses the “bluest eyes”, she interprets the ostracism of others as the manifestation of their jealousy. The gossip of the community’s citizens, however, suggests that their disregard of her stems instead from her pregnancy. Claudia and Freida MacTeer pity Pecola. They desperately wish that someone would want the baby to live. Together they plan a course of action; they decide to pray to God on Pecola’s behalf and promise “to be good for a month” (149). Convinced that a personal sacrifice is necessary to convince God of their seriousness, they decide to bury the money they’ve earned by selling seeds and had hoped to use purchase a bicycle, and plant the remaining seeds. The girls believe that if the seeds grow, Pecola’s child will live. Like her, they await a sign from Nature to suggest their dreams will be fulfilled. The adult Claudia concludes the novel with her observations that the seeds did not grow and that similarly, Pecola’s child died prematurely. She reminisces about how she and her sister treated Pecola when their plan failed:

We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her. Our flowers never grew. I was convinced that Freida was right, that I had planted them too deeply. How could I have been so sloven? So we avoided Pecola Breedlove – forever. (158)
The girls like the adults in the community, view Pecola as a reminder of their failure, an inability to change the circumstances of a small girl’s life so that she is needed, desired. The adult Claudia, however, is able to assess the function Pecola’s presence served in the community.

All of us – all who knew her – 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, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength. (159)

The adult Claudia also shifts the blame for Pecola’s inability to bear a healthy child from herself:

I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply, how it was the fault of the earth, the land, of our town. I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruits 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. Its too late. At least on the edge of my
town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late. (160)

The tragic flight of Pecola Breedlove into madness is the responsibility of the community, the larger white society and the more immediate black community in Lorain, Ohio. Her parents cannot be exonerated either. The white society and its racist standards of beauty are responsible for Pauline’s and Cholly’s attitudes toward life, attitudes which directly shape Pecola’s existence. As Harris notes “there enough stunted adults in the novel to ensure the children like Pecola will never develop healthy conceptions of what they as adults might be” (Harris 68). Barbara Christian links their behaviour to their self-esteem: “As people come to believe that they are their appearances, they behave more and more as society expects them to. So the Breedloves fight and destroy each other in their ugly storefront because they come to believe in their own ugliness, their intrinsic unworthiness” (Christian 52-53).

In contrast to transferring and teaching Pecola ‘Life affirming behaviours’ and the beauty of self, Pauline Breedlove models for Pecola, ‘alien self behaviours’. She assumes a self foreign to her natural disposition and inclination as she accepts the stigma of her blackness. Pauline attempts to change her way of speaking, saying children instead of ‘chiren’. She also attempts to change her look and “improve her associations”. But she as a mother distances herself from her children. She lives her life indifferent to their significance as human beings and as extension of herself. Even the way Sammy and Pecola address their mother, as “Mrs. Breedlove”, communicates the distance between parent and child. Instead she undertakes an aggressive assimilation agenda to integrate herself into the strangely new environment of the North. The unattainable white ideal gets gratified by assuming the role of
“the ideal servant” to a white family – the Fishers. Pauline gets some level of respectability in her own eyes in this subservient role to the extent that she becomes more concerned about the floor when Pecola accidentally knocks off a pan of Pauline’s blueberry cobbler. It is when Pecola and the MacTeer girls are at Fishers, waiting for Pauline to get the wash, that this incident takes place. The little blue eyed white girl cries, though Pecola is the one who has been burned by the falling cobbler.

It may have been nervousness, awkwardness, but the pan tilted under Pecola’s fingers and fell to the floor, splattering blackish blueberries everywhere. Most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out and began hopping about just as Mrs. Breedlove entered with a tightly packed laundry bag. In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Freida and me by implication. “Crazy fool … my floor, mess … look what you … work … get on out … now that … crazy …my floor, my floor … my floor.” Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we back away in dread.


Morrison presents this stark difference of white supremacy that Pauline coddles and pampers the white girl promising to make new pie for her. She
doesn’t care about Pecola’s burnt leg and instead slaps and hits her. Morrison very clearly depicts Pauline’s craving for white standards. But the fault does not lie in Pauline’s character. The tragedy lies in the fact that the ideas toward which she reached were ideal white standards made to affirm white culture and white looks, and to reject, vilify and nullify anything opposite it, anything black. The ideals she embraced could only be accepted and acted upon as she rejected and negated herself, the indelible fact of her blackness. Because this idea like Pecola’s blue eyes was utterly unattainable, belief in the ideas necessarily created a total distortion of self. For Pecola this meant insanity, for Pauline it meant a larger than life role as “ideal servant”.

The black endorsement of white cultural standard of beauty is evident in the whole text and all black female characters accept this except Claudia. She questions her own lack of self-worth though when she sees all the adults genuflecting around Maureen Peal. She felt ‘comfortable in her skin’ (62) and knew ‘the thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us’. This ‘Thing’ is the insidious racism permeating every level of society in America and judging people on the basis of their skin colour. Thus this ‘thing’ was also the dominant culture’s standard of beauty that had nothing to do with ‘blackness’. Shyam Sree Basu comments:

Claudia’s confusion arises from her inability to understand the power of the dominant culture’s ideology. This is the famous DuBoisian trope of ‘double consciousness’ with which Claudia is confronted. W.E.B.DuBois had spoken about it in ‘The Souls of Black Folk’: …the Negro is … born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.
It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” (Basu 89)

Unlike Pecola who falls prey to this double consciousness, Claudia is able to establish a sense of self, independent of societal aesthetics and values that allow her to survive and gain perspective on Pecola’s tragedy. Claudia is solidly part of the community, but from an early age rejects the worship of white baby dolls and Shirley Temple. Her voice is the authoritative one, re-creating and transforming the voice she used in childhood to challenge the discourses current in the community she grew up in. In childhood she did not have power to make an inroad to the ideology about female beauty and worth. As an adult she is able to structure the narrative in a way which privileges her childhood voice. As a child, the most her voice could do was make Maureen run, but even then, she knew to reply on non-racial standards of beauty in her insults. The most important of the voices in Claudia’s childhood world are those of the women in community, who form a chorus which tells the neighbourhood stories. Events are circulated among them with everyone putting in her opinion about the ethical values at stake. There are three main clusters of women in the novel: the housewives, the church women (there is an overlap between these two groups), and the prostitutes – the Maginot Line, China, and Poland. The sex workers are shunned by the other women who value conventional respectability, but they associate with each other and also provide one of the few sources of kindness Pecola experiences.
“Hi, dumplin’. Where your socks?” Marie seldom called Pecola the same thing twice, but invariably her epithets were fond ones chosen from menus and dishes that were forever uppermost in her mind.

“Hello, Miss Marie. Hello, Miss China. Hello, Miss Poland.”

“You heard me. Where your socks? You as bare-legged as a yard dog.”

All the three prostitutes share an oppositional perspective on the community in terms of how they earn their livelihood and relate to men, who they genuinely hate.

Except for Marie’s fabled love for Dewey Prince, these women hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or discrimination. They abused their visitors with a scorn grown mechanical from use. Black men, white men, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Jews, Poles, whatever – all were inadequate and weak, all came under their jaundiced eyes and were the recipients of their disinterested wrath. They took delight in cheating them. (47-48)

All the three women stand outside of the community’s critical stance towards the Breedloves and can offer Pecola some measure of companionship and affection. They become the only positive communal force Pecola knows outside of her brief acquaintanceship with the MacTeers. While Pecola’s mother denies her daughter love, and her father distorts her vision of love, the three women post opposites of the ‘colored’ Geraldine and the morally righteous
Pauline. They extend surrogate love to Pecola. These fallen women look on their society’s rejection with total disdain and respond to the cruelty of their fate by hating men. Morrison presents these morally inferior women as more authentic who do not live a pretentious life but are an insight to reality.

But for Pecola, throughout the novel, Morrison emphasizes the pain and suffering that African Americans experience due to white racism. Morrison depicts “a white race that sees blackness as a metaphor for lack, perhaps as a justification for disenfranchising blacks politically and economically” (Heinze 15). Morrison clearly illustrates this oppression of blacks that took the form of dehumanisation, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. Accepting the social norms of beauty – white as beautiful – it becomes a part of slave legacy. The blacks themselves though harm their own selves by following this ideology. They suppress their own identity, their culture and heritage, in order to conform to the standards of a white society. The efforts of Pauline, in order to fit in with the expectations of white society, take her own identity away.

In despising their blackness and shaping their femaleness into something false, they not only take on a narrow and self-defeating self-definition; they also participate in the cultural denial of black female subjectivity that destroys Pecola. (Frye 103)

In addition to suppressing her (Pauline’s) own alien standards of beauty and propriety, she pass on this self-hate to Pecola. She tries in futile to distance herself from traditional blackness and adhere to the standards of white society. Pauline’s dominant characteristics, however, is her over-whelming self-hatred, which precludes struggle of any kind. She is aware of the turning wheels of racial oppression in her life, but she makes no effort to stop the turning. Instead,
she oils and axels and polishes she spokes so that the wheels turn more smoothly, more rapidly, and without interruption. We find resemblance between Pauline and the traditional image of black mammy. The black mammy is a pervasive character in white American fiction. She appears as Disley in The Sound and The Fury, Berenice in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mocking Bird and simply ‘Mammy’ in Margaret Shell’s Gone With the Wind. Whatever her name, and whatever the artistic merit of the book that contains her, she is always “a dutiful black female servant who attempts to keep white families from cutting their souls on the shattered pieces of their morally bankrupt lives, while able to place only a thin and soiled bandage on the open wounds of her own black family” (Weerer 21).

Another extreme is the example of black superiority which is showcased in the character of Geraldine. In her we see the status quo personified; she embodies the community’s strictly codified caste system. Geraldine, her husband Louis, and her son, Louis Junior, are “colored people”. She explains to her son Louis Junior the difference between “colored people” and “niggers”.

They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestions of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. Even though he was light-skinned, it was possible to ash. The line between colored and nigger was not always clear; subtle and telltale signs threatened to erode it, and the watch has to be constant. (71)
Geraldine tries to fit into white society by denying her blackness. Her beautifully decorated and immaculate house is juxtaposed with Pecola’s squalid living room and Claudia’s window stuffed with rags. She belongs among those black “ladies” who are taught how to behave in white society. She is also sexually repressed as she abhors such funkiness of passion. She is class conscious, and tries to separate herself from most of the poor black people whom she considers to be unacceptable by the white community.

Pecola represents all that Geraldine and her community’s commodified value system loathe, while at the same time her movement within the community serves to more clearly define the community’s alienation, repression, and internalization. This oppositional move appears to pit the pure evil of Geraldine against the poor helplessness of Pecola. Pecola meets Louis Junior at the playground and he invites her into his home. Pecola is enthralled by its interior: “How beautiful, she thought, what a beautiful houses” (73). But once inside, Louis Junior throws a black cat in her face and afterwards he swings it around his head. The cat is thrown against the window and killed just as Geraldine enters the house. Predictably, Louis accuses Pecola of killing the pet, and Geraldine sides with her son telling Pecola to leave her house. Clearly in this scene Pecola embodies all that Geraldine despises and fears:

She had seen this little girl of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edges of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying “shet up!” Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked
everything. Unblinkingly and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and all the waste in between. (75)

The hatred the reader may feel for Geraldine and Louis Junior, is tempered by our knowledge that they, too, are victims. They all represent “products” of a commodified system that, in its imposition of social and economic order through the manufactured image, seeks to and succeeds in inverting the truth of their lives; and by doing so, the system causes each character to uneasily mediate between the contradictions of image and substance, and thus between the divisiveness of desire and self-hatred. The Breedlove children are abused and abandoned by Pauline and Cholly. Morrison writes, “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Later in the novel Pauline almost beats her daughter to death. Pauline places the blame for incest and illegitimate pregnancy on Pecola, the victim of her father’s sexual abuse.

When Cholly Breedlove burns his house down and rapes his daughter, he is passing on this abuse that he has suffered at the hands of white society. His self-hatred manifests itself in his abuse of his children. Though Morrison does not portray Cholly as a monster, she makes it clear that he possesses demons of his own. She describes his father’s abandonment of him and the repeated rejection after Cholly tracks him down. Morrison’s revelation of the abuse of blacks direct toward themselves and their own race is always tempered by exposure of the reasons for their madness. Not only in The Bluest Eye but in her other novels as well Morrison highlight black racism against blacks. This subtle racism by blacks for blacks starts with The Bluest Eye. Some blacks began at that time to feel that they were of a higher social class than other blacks. Geraldine is one of
the examples in the novel. Even Pauline is surprised at the hostility of other blacks.

Up north they was everywhere – next door, downstairs, all over the streets – and colored folks few and far between. Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count,’cept I didn’t expect it from them. (93)

Light-skinned Maureen Peal, a mulatto girl is regarded ny the black children as rich and beautiful and is accepted by whites, as well. Maureen is aware of her social superiority and describes a movie that she saw where a mulatto girl hates her mother because she is black and ugly. When she becomes angry at Claudia, Freida, and Pecola, she uses colour as a weapon and taunts them, yelling, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (61). Wilfred Samuels examines the contrast between Maureen and Pecola, “Whereas Maureen’s complexion and sloe green eyes make her influential winning her preferential treatment from and the admiration of teachers and peers and allowing her to wallow in comfort and care, dark-skinned Pecola is considered black, irrelevant, and uninfluential” (Samuels 11).

Morrison presents the church family as another example of light-skinned blacks who feel superior to their dark-skinned brethren. The West Indian family of Soaphead Church is very proud of the white heritage indicated by their light skin. His forefathers took great care of indicting this “Anglo-philia” to their children and grandchildren.
With the confidence born of a conviction of superiority, they performed well at schools. They were industrious, orderly, and energetic, hoping to prove beyond a doubt De Gobineau’s hypothesis that “all civilizations derive from the white race, that none can exist without its help, and that a society is great and brilliant only so far as it preserves the blood of the noble group that created it. (133)

Morrison’s exploration of how black race has perpetuated hatred and violence against itself is truly illuminating. Even though Morrison exposes the white aesthetic and white prejudice as the root of the hatred, she makes it clear that from her perspective, African American suffering is partially a result of self-contempt. The reason for the tendency of black people to harass other black people is also self-hatred induced by white hegemony. White standards corrupted the minds of black people in such a way that black people developed self-hatred.

It was as though some mysterious all knowing master has given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master has said, “You are ugly people.” They looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement, saw, in fact, support for it banging at them from every billboard, every move, every glance. “Yes”, they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (34)
Black children though are the most helpless victims of all, subject to both whites and black adults. Morrison clearly establishes that Cholly and Pauline’s behaviour is a result of their mistreatment by a racist society, but also portrays the behaviour as inexcusable. By the end of the novel, the rejection and abuse of her parent and the hostility of society have taken their toll on Pecola, producing a human being who is “so sad to see.” Morrison shows what can happen to a person who is alienated from positive black traditions. Pecola’s yearning for white beauty standard of blue eyes is an eternal need for she is not aware that she is just not built that way. Raymond opines: “Pecola Breedlove is a young black girl driven literally … by the pressure toward absolute physical beauty in a culture whose white standards of beauty … are impossible for her to meet, though no less alluring and demanding. Surrounded by cultural messages that she is ugly by definition, she can achieve peace only by retreating into schizophrenia” (Raymond 49). Even though Morrison is conscious of the role class-aspirations play in the minor families, she often discusses these aspirations as if they were intra-racial prejudices based on skin colour rather than class conflict. Her discussions on class conflict, which are concluded within, are over shadowed by her discussions on racial prejudice. As a result, the focus in *The Bluest Eye* is on racism as a primary problem confronting African people. There are many incidents in the novel which hurt Pecola into a feeling of isolation and pain because of her race. Her encounter with the storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, makes her aware that for many people she does not really exist.

She looks up at him and sees the vacuum where curiosity ought to lodge. And something more. The total absence of human recognition – the glazed separateness. She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. Yet
this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom
lid is distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of all white people.
So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are
flux and anticipation. But her blackness that accounts for, that creates,
the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes. (42)

She thinks that the “vacuum” in his eyes which she has seen often in white
people is created by her blackness and ugliness. In the face of her invisibility,
she is deprived of a sense of worth and becomes nothing. As she walks back
from the store, she gorges herself with Mary Jane, a picture of a little blond girl
with blue eyes on the wrapper of the candy. Rejected by the store owner, Pecola
swallows the sweetness of candy with the mixed emotions of love, hate, pain,
and anger. By eating Mary Jane candies, she identifies herself with Mary Jane
and becomes Mary Jane in her fantasy: “To eat the candy is somehow to eat the
eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane” (43). In Pecola’s
adolescent mind, the idea of beauty as embodied in the figural images of Mary
Jane or Shirley Temple is reified into objects such as candy or cup. But in her
yearning for the blue eyes, Pecola has come to equate “I” with “eye”. Here Toni
Morrison’s use of the singular “eye” in her title is by no means accidental.

… The Bluest Eye can be a pun on “the bluest I”, the gloomy ego, the
black man feeling very blue from the psychological bombardment he is
exposed to from early life to late. The novel is, then, a blues
enunciating the pain of the black man in America and an attempt to
grapple with the pain which is sometimes existential. The superlative
“bluest” implies that other groups are “blue” and “bluer” – and, of
course, the black race is the “bluest”. (114)
To sum up, Morrison describes throughout in the novel, the hardships of Black female characters, and the difficulties they go through. She analyses how they, despite their position try to overcome the despair thrust upon by the superior blacks, whites and the society on the whole. Morrison’s novels explore a world of inter-locking system of race, class, and sex oppression which is seen as a threat to black women and her survival. Where on one hand the sisterly bond between Claudia and Freida empowers them to fight racial denigration, on the other Pecola’s alienation from family and community results in her psychic fragmentation altogether. Unlike Pecola and Pauline, Claudia and Freida manage to preserve their original identities, not allowing the western ideals of beauty dictate their values. Pauline and Pecola both reject their blackness and with it their true identities. “By looking at themselves through the eyes of a white culture, the Breedlove family lose all notion of their own black identity” (Powell 751). Pauline succeeds in finding her identity as a servant in a white family by blindly accepting western values, whereas Pecola goes insane because she demands a real change of her appearance as a proof of her beauty. However, in process, all the female characters lose something – Claudia and Freida lose their innocence. Even though they fight against the stereotype of white beauty, they experience disillusionment when they fail to save Pecola’s baby. Pauline loses her black self since she exchanges the life in the community she belongs to for the illusion of belonging to the white people’s world. Pecola loses the most – her sanity, after suffering the torment at the hands of school boys, Maureen Peal, the storekeeper, Mr. Yacobowski, Geraldine and her son Louis Junior, her own parents Pauline and Cholly. She is unable to come to terms with her true identity and desires the impossible, which completely ruins her frail personality.
As a womanist reading, Morrison is not only concerned about the women/men survival, but she is raising the question of the struggles and strife’s along with the survival of the people as whole belonging to the black community. All her characters male and female are bound by the boundaries of their own oppressions. Be it Cholly, Pauline, Pecola, the three sex-workers or the community women. They all have their own demons of racial or gender discriminations. All fight against the psychic consequences of slavery. The internal condition of one’s denial as human subject has deep repercussions in the individual’s internal world. Morrison deals this entire issue of ‘being black’ in an implicit manner. Being a woman she views the world around her with the eyes of a woman. She portrays her black female characters that of Pecola and Pauline as tragic sufferers because of colour. Their oppression based on their race could be traced historically which black men also receive due to race. Many factors have great important influence in this connection as history provides: “… from viewpoints of Whites, the fact of slavery and colonization must at least have reinforced the nation of racial hierarchy with Blacks in an inferior position” (International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences 1968: 442). Further Rochwati quotes:

Huda in his thesis (2006:38) cites that genetically, White European is the most superior race, yellow Asian is the moderate, and Black African is the most inferior. In more general term, all Whites are everywhere superior and thus, deserve rights to oppress Blacks who are inferior. So that, Blacks becomes the most prominent victim of racism throughout the world. (Rochwati 2007)
Morrison’s black female characters thus fall victims of slavery under the notions of false standards of beauty i.e. ‘white is beautiful’. They suffer both physically and psychologically and are ‘doubly oppressed’ that by the white supremacy and oppressed by black males. *The Bluest Eye* illustrates the difficulties life in America poses to black Americans. Barbara Christian notes that Morrison has demonstrated the cultural clash familiar to American blacks.

This simple theme, the desire of a black girl about blue eyes, is a real and symbolic statement about the conflict between the good and the beautiful of two cultures. The theme is at the base of the conflict of artistic and societal values between the Anglo-American and Afro-American cultures, complicated by the psycho political dominance of one culture over another. As such, this novel is a book about mythic, political, and cultural mutilation as much as it is a book about race and sex hatred. (Christian 138)

Pecola is portrayed by Morrison as the sacrificial victim of a people pretending to be something other than what they are, in a universe whose seasons suggest that a normal growth cycle is an utter impossibility. Her madness is the direct result of her own family’s and community’s failure to provide her with the feelings of self-worth. She becomes the embodiment, the end product of gradual progressions away from the culture centre and from community. As a result of racism, the breakdown of traditional socialization structures within African American community, there has been an ongoing tendency toward a growing estrangement from ‘self’. The battle now is for the intact mind. Here in *The Bluest Eye* the narrative is extended by shifting the focus from the suffering body in slavery as the metaphor for the site of injury, to
the eyes (as the book title indicates) as metaphor for the place or site that is violently assaulted. The ‘eyes’ are a symbol for the mind, will and emotions – the inner life. Through vision – with the eyes, the character creates deepest perception of her ‘self’ and also beholds the image. Pecola’s main problem is internal. She did not have a satisfactory or proper vision of herself. Vision and beauty are linked here in the novel. Morrison’s narrative techniques highlight this idea. The Bluest Eye is told from several points of views. One is that of an omniscient narrator who shares information about characters and events. Claudia MacTeer provides two points of view: her first – person narrative from the perspective of a child is balanced by her retrospective outlook as an adult. Structurally the novel is divided into four sections – autumn, winter, spring, and summer – named for the four seasons of the year. Each section begins with a paragraph from the Dick-and-Jane readers. The autumn section provides information about the Breedlove’s apartment, home life and personal and family struggles. Symbolically also their apartment which is situated on the ugliest side, shows the situation of the characters as well. They adopt this ugliness and believe that they are ugly. The second section, winter, gives a glimpse of Geraldine and her son Louis Junior who abuse Pecola and show black superiority and black racism towards black. The spring section provides information about Pauline, Cholly and situations that shaped their lives. Pecola’s rape and her consequent belief of attaining blue eyes by Soaphead Church’s magic also take place. The novel closes with summer season. While in this season usually the earth is at its best and fullest, Pecola is at her worst. She becomes a victim of delusion, insaneness and resides in a world with her imaginary blue eyes and imaginary friend. Morrison has made brilliant use of literary devices of Irony and Symbolism. The naming of the characters like Breedlove reflects irony. In this shabby home there is no breeding of love. Instead they breed contempt, self-loathing, violence, and bitterness. Each chapter is ironically named after a season. The characters and circumstances
however defy normal seasonal conditions. Symbolism is made extensive use of.
The Dick- and- Jane series of books, homes/houses, blue eyes, marigolds, outdoors etc. are symbolically portrayed. The Dick-and-Jane symbolizes a happy, beautiful home with a supportive family. As against this, the Breedloves live in a shabby decaying apartment with no emotional bonding and only unhappiness. The blue eyes represent the self-hate and racial contempt. Marigolds also represent hope as well as the continuing cycle of life. For Freida and Claudia MacTeer the marigolds represent their hopes for Pecola’s unborn baby. Morrison uses the term ‘outdoors’ to symbolize homelessness and community separation.

By structuring the novel brilliantly Morrison succeeds in raising issues about racism as the legacy of slavery. Bringing the whole subject about the concept of beauty she questions the statement – Beauty is in the eye of beholder. It has become a standard made by society for society. But the interpretation of beauty changes as it is no longer a person’s opinion but the society’s acceptance on whole. The society fails to establish the demarcation line of beauty and thus beauty got established as ‘white’ only. Critics though have argued that blacks, from the earliest days of slave trafficking perceived themselves and their community as ugly compared to what they saw in a European society. Morrison therefore entreats black Americans to deprogram themselves from the Eurocentric standard of beauty and the emotional tension it creates.

The western concept of beauty suggests that beauty is relegated to the European race. In “Beauty and Evolution” William Burke says, “Along with truth and goodness, physical beauty has a long philosophical history as one of the three supreme values of western civilization” (75). For instance beauty is the centrepiece of the classic trinity (truth, goodness, physical beauty). The American standard of beauty is rigid and all are judged under “the white the
better”. The Eurocentric concept of beauty and sexual appeal is so deeply set in the general American culture that women go to the extremes to fulfil the requirements and attain the appearance worshipped in the magazines, with this perspective is that it reeks of racism. The white women as benchmarks of beauty assume propositions at the expense, neglect and denigration of the multitudes of black women.

In modern context, the media has become captivated with this outlook on beauty. Edward Martin comments in his thesis on the role of media in contemporary times as that expounding on this propaganda:

It is revealing that the prestigious CBS news program “60 Minutes” recently published an article highlighting actress Aishwarya Rai as, perhaps, the “World’s Most Beautiful Woman”. Not surprising, Miss Rai is a light-skinned woman from India with sharp Caucasian-like features. The article also makes reference to white women of the past who were (and are) projected as the epitome of beauty and refinement. Women like Grace Kelly, Ingrid Bergman and Elizabeth Taylor are examples of women who have this beauty.” (Martin 58-59)

Conventionally, beauty standards are perceived according to the cultural norms that people are accustomed to and this outlook has great control on how the attractiveness of a person is perceived. In The Bluest Eye, Pecola Breedlove, the central figure of self-hatred encapsulates the difficulties some blacks have with reclaiming their own beauty and identity; but she is not unique which is why Morrison uses Pecola to speak to the black population. In this country black Americans, perhaps more than anyone else, carry a heavier psychological burden regarding physical beauty. The mental damage of centuries of
bombardment with Euro-American standards of beauty has had a tremendous impact on how blacks view themselves within what is essentially a euro-centric culture. Reminiscent of Richard Wright, whose controversial novel, *Native Son*, relies closely on the theme of effects of racism on the oppressed, Morrison confirms the importance of western literature and beliefs to the African American experience in America. In some ways *The Bluest Eye* stands opposed to a more hermetic work like Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, which despite its many strengths, does not come to terms with the academic and economic foundations of racism and whose representations of temperament and individual growth suffer accordingly. Morrison’s characters are more realistic and in the end more moving than Walker’s because they function in a world shaped by a complex and sometimes tyrannical cultural tradition. Hence, just as the story embarks with two prologues, perhaps the best way to think of the conclusion of *The Bluest Eye* is to appreciate it as two endings. The chapter ends with optimism: Freida and Claudia unselfishly surrender their own desires to help Pecola, planting seeds to imply that the natural world always promises renewal. Unfortunately, the books’ second ending is a bleak one: Claudia too is capable of thoughtlessly using Pecola to enhance her own sense of worth because she believes the world is unkind, and, in any case, nature cannot redeem human failings. The lyrical beauty of Morrison’s language, which picks up momentum in this final section, suggest that there may be a kind of salvation in remembering, in telling stories and in singing. In the scene where Claudia says, “its much, much, much too late (160), one might be tempted to believe that there is no hope for Pecola. But Morrison shows there is hope by her ability to blend life and death, and of beauty and ugliness with the likeness of “the garbage and the sunflowers” (160). Perhaps it is too late for Pecola and Claudia’s society, but for blacks today this story is their catalyst for change by seeing the beauty within self and the black community.
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