

Racialised beauty: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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This essay is part of my PhD thesis examining the construction of racialised and gendered identities in fictional texts, specifically Afro-American and Indigenous Australian women's writings. My research aim is to analyse how these identities are constructed and explored in fiction by using a feminist postcolonial approach.

In this essay, I will focus on one of Toni Morrison's novels, *The Bluest Eye*.

The Bluest Eye is Morrison's first novel published in 1970*. In the novel, Morrison challenges Western standards of beauty and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is socially constructed. Morrison also recognises that if whiteness is used as a standard of beauty or anything else, then the value of blackness is diminished and this novel works to subvert that tendency. In demonstrating pride in being black, this writer does not simply portray positive images of blackness. Instead, she focuses on the damage that the black women characters suffer through the construction of femininity in a racialised society (Matus, 1998, 37). As Gurleen Grewal also argues, merely reversing perceived 'ugliness' to beautiful blackness "is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes" (Grewal, 1998, 21).

In this essay, I will first consider constructions of femininity and then suggest how Morrison's fictive black people respond differently to Western standards of beauty.

In her article "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernisation of Patriarchal Power", Sandra Lee Bartky examines the construction of Western femininity by applying Michel Foucault's theories about the production of subjectivity in modern societies. Foucault argues that "discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, docile bodies" (in Bartky, 1988, 62). However, Bartky recognises that Foucault does not consider gender differences and "is blind to [the] disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine" (Bartky, 1988, 63-64). She further argues that analysing disciplinary practices that produce feminine bodies reveals sexism operating in Western patriarchal society (Bartky, 1988, 64). However, in doing so, Bartky does not consider racial differences. She argues that

[t]he larger disciplines that construct a 'feminine' body out of a female one are by no means race- or class-specific. There is little evidence that women of color or working-class women are in general less committed to the incarnation of an ideal femininity than their more privileged sisters (Bartky, 1988, 72).

It may be true that beauty is a central focus of many women, and according to Naomi Wolf, this is a very powerful myth (Wolf, 1990). Yet, since the ideal of beauty is and has been largely depicted as a woman with light skin and blue eyes, it is even less possible for women

* Morrison, Toni (1970, 1999), *The Bluest Eye*, Vintage. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

of colour than for white women to achieve this ideal. As Paul C. Taylor argues, “a white-dominated culture has *racialised* beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white [people] are more likely to have” (Taylor, 1999, 17, emphasis in original). Therefore, in the process of trying to achieve beauty, as Taylor further argues, “the experience of a black woman ... differs from the experiences of ... Jewish and Irish women” (Taylor, 1999, 20). This can clearly be seen in the ways that the black women characters in Morrison’s novel suffer in trying to conform to Western standards of beauty.

The Bluest Eye tells the story of an eleven year old black girl, Pecola Breedlove, who wants to have blue eyes, because she sees herself, and is regarded by most of the characters in the novel, as ugly. The standard of beauty that her peers subscribe to is represented by the white child actress, Shirley Temple, who has the desired blue eyes. The novel starts with the description of an ideal white family but in the near-parodic style of a school reading primer, where we meet Dick and Jane and their lovely parents living in a nice and comfortable house with a lovely dog and a cat. The Dick and Jane text functions as “the hegemonizing force of an ideology ([focused by] the supremacy of ‘the bluest eye’) by which a dominant culture reproduces [its] hierarchical power structure[s]” (Grewal, 1998, 24). As Donald B. Gibson also argues, the Dick and Jane text implies one of the primary and most insidious ways that the dominant culture exercises its hegemony, through the educational system. It reveals the role of education in both oppressing the victim – and more to the point – teaching the victim how to oppress her own black self by internalising the values that dictate standards of beauty (Gibson, 1989, 20).

In contrast to this hegemonic identity, the main black characters are depicted as various and very different characters located in three hierarchical families: “first Geraldine’s (a counterfeit of the idealised white family), ... [then] the MacTeers and at the bottom [of the social order], the Breedloves” (Ogunyemi, 1977, 113). The novel shows how these black characters respond to the dominant culture differently and this refutes easy binary social distinctions.

Pauline Breedlove, Geraldine, Maureen Peal, and Pecola are black characters who try to conform to an imposed ideal of femininity. They are absorbed and marginalised by the “cultural icons portraying physical beauty: movies, billboards, magazines, books, newspapers, window signs, dolls, and drinking cups” (Gibson, 1989, 20). Pauline Breedlove, for example, learns about physical beauty from the movies. In Morrison’s words,

[a]long 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 (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 95).

Consequently, in trying to conform to the ideal of white femininity, the black women characters despise their blackness which in turn leads to self hatred. They see themselves through the eyes of white people and their worship of white beauty also has destructive effects on their own community. This is because, as Taylor argues:

[o]ne of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines. ... The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity (Taylor, 1999, 16).

Geraldine, for example, represses her black characteristics which are not 'fitted' to white femininity as she strives "to get rid of the funkiness" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 64). She also rejects Pecola when she sees her in her house as Pecola seems to embody all the negative aspects of her views of black girls (see also Bouson, 2000, 37-38):

She looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel on the shoe. ... She had seen this little girl all 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!' (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 71-72).

Being well educated and having adopted Western ways of life, Geraldine draws the line between coloured and black. She deliberately teaches her son the differences between coloured and black: "Coloured people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 67, also in Bouson, 2000, 37). Maureen Peal, a light-skinned girl at school, also thinks that she is pretty and Pecola is ugly and Morrison sets up a hierarchy of skin tone marking proximity and distance in relation to idealised physical attributes. As "[a] high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 47), Maureen is treated well at school:

She enchanted the entire school. When teachers called on her, they smiled encouragingly. Black boys didn't trip her in the halls; white boys didn't stone her, white girls didn't suck their teeth when she was assigned to be their work partners; black girls stepped aside when she wanted to use the sink in the girls' toilets, and their eyes genuflected under sliding lids (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 47-48).

Finally, having been treated very badly by most people surrounding her, Pecola yearns to have blue eyes in the hope that people will love her.

Despite those radical distinctions, the construction of femininity for black women is somewhat similar to that of white women in terms of gendered body and subjected body. For example, Pecola sees herself as ugly, as an object possessing an abject body. This is paralleled with what Bartky says about the process of disciplining practices to gain the ideal body of femininity which produces "a 'practiced and subjected' body, that is a body on which an inferior status has been inscribed. A woman's face must be made up, that is to say, made over, and so must her body" (Bartky, 1988, 71). This suggests, as Bartky further argues, that "[women's] bodies are deficient" (Bartky, 1988, 71).

However, as Pecola does not have blue eyes, these social symbols of white beauty, she cannot come anywhere near to the ideal of white beauty. In other words, white women may lack something in terms of the gendered body, but due to their white privilege, they are not racialised in the same way. Grewal also argues that

[I]f Irigaray's feminine subject (a universal feminine subject) is defined as lack, as absence, then the black woman is doubly lacking, for she must simulate or feign her femininity as she dissimulates or conceals her blackness" (Grewal, 1998, 26).

Therefore, *The Bluest Eye* can also be read as text which is critical of liberal white feminism which excludes the experience of black women. As Madhu Dubey also argues,

[t]he presence that defines black feminine characters in the novel as deficient is represented not by the black man but the white woman. ... Each expression of black feminine desire, whether Pecola's longing for blue eyes, Frieda's love of Shirley Temple, Claudia's hatred of white dolls, Maureen's adoration of Betty Grable, or Pauline's of Jean Harlow, takes the white woman as its object (Dubey, 1994, 39-40).

However, not all the black characters adore or are in awe of Western standards of beauty. The novel also shows black people who are aware of the danger of adopting Western standards of beauty. Claudia, the young girl narrator, at the very beginning of the novel, describes herself as indifferent to both white dolls and Shirley Temple. She also realises that she does not really hate light-skinned Maureen but hates the thing that makes Maureen beautiful: "[a]nd all the time we knew that Maureen Peal was not worthy of such intense hatred. The *Thing* to fear was the *Thing* that made *her* beautiful, and not us" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 58, emphasis in original). It is the ideology of whiteness that makes Maureen appear beautiful (Munafo, 1995, 8) and as Bouson argues,

the 'Thing' Claudia learns to fear is the white standard of beauty that members of the African American community have internalised, a standard that favours the 'high-yellow' Maureen Peal and denigrates the 'black and ugly' Pecola Breedlove (Bouson, 2000, 31).

As children, Claudia and her sister Frieda are happy with their difference, their blackness: "We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars, and could not comprehend this unworthiness" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 57). This may suggest that Claudia resists the pressure to conform to a white vision of beauty.

However, as a child, Claudia wonders why people treat Maureen well because she is beautiful:

Dolls we could destroy, but we could not destroy the honey voices of parents and aunts, the obedience in the eyes of our peers, the slippery light in the eyes of our teachers when they encountered the Maureen Peals of the world. What was the secret? What did we lack? Why was it important? And so what? (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 57).

As a child, Claudia also wonders why people admire little white girls:

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 make people look at them and say, 'Awwwww', but not at me? The eye slide of black women as they approached them on the street, and the possessive gentleness of their touch as they handled them (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 15).

Claudia only later learns to love Shirley Temple: "I learned much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness..." (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 16). This learning to love Shirley Temple suggests two things. Firstly, it reflects the mother-daughter relationship. As a form of

identifying with her mother, Claudia's love of Shirley Temple, as Anne Anlin Cheng argues, can be read

not merely or primarily as a gesture of social compliance but rather a response to the call of the mother, as a perverse form of maternal connection. Only by learning to love little white girls can little black girls be like their mothers (Cheng, 2000, 200).

Secondly, Claudia's learning to love Shirley Temple may also suggest that 'beauty' is something learned which is not 'natural' or inherent.

However, when Claudia later learns to love Shirley Temple, she finds out that "the change was adjustment without improvement" (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 16) and adjustment made by black people remains an illusion. Towards the end of the novel, Claudia realises that

[a]nd fantasy it was, for 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 courted death in order to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life. 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 (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 163).

Similarly, Claudia recognises that if we follow the white ideology of aesthetics we may gain beauty but only at the expense of others. Claudia blames the black community which adopts "a white standard of beauty ... that makes Pecola its scapegoat" (Furman, 1996, 21). Pecola is symbolically 'dumped': being pregnant, ugly, and mad and an object of repulsive nightmares:

All of us –all who knew [Pecola] – 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 humour. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used – to silence our own nightmares (Morrison, 1970, 1999, 163).

This also shows the danger of the transformation of western ideology into black community which enforces hierarchical power structures.

Therefore, Claudia's consciousness can also be read as decolonising her mind from colonial oppression as she frees herself from white standards imposed on black people. As Grewal argues, "individuals collude in their own oppression by internalising [the] dominant culture's values in the face of great material contradictions" (Grewal, 1998, 21). Quoting Terry Eagleton she also argues that the most difficult thing in emancipation is to free "ourselves from ourselves" (Grewal, 1998, 21). Through Claudia, however, the novel suggests that some are capable of challenging this (see also Munafo, 1995, 17), but for the victims of such oppression this awareness may come too late.

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