

EXTENDED ESSAY

ENGLISH B

Category 3

How are women racially and sexually depicted in the novel “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison according to historical and social context with an emphasis on the female characters?

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Abstract

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is a heavy book to say the least. Not only does it cover racism in 1940's America, but it also dives into the gender roles forced on young girls. I was very attracted to this work due to my interest into the topics of racism and sexism that are still modern problems. This essay seeks an answer to how the novel portrayed women in line with historical setting, in order to explore the following research question: **How are women racially and sexually depicted in the novel "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison according to historical and social context with an emphasis on the female characters?**

The scope of this research will be the analysis of the book itself focusing on how these characters were created, additionally their significance. The themes of self-loathing and construction of beauty will be explored as they play specific roles into the name of the novel and the figures that were created. The variety of female characters provide a better analysis of this topic. Although it is written mainly from the point of view of Claudia, we hear the stories of several different women and girls whose lives are somehow interconnected to Claudia's whether directly or indirectly. These different stories contribute to how they were depicted in that certain era as their skin color was a major component into their living conditions.

I conclude that the lack of black representation in specially media is one of the strongest reasons why these women of color had unattainable life goals set by society. Pecola's yearning to have the bluest eyes thinking that everything would be perfect if she did, Claudia struggling to constantly fight these stereotypes and the emphasis of exclusively white movie stars is some of the elements into my conclusion.

Word Count: 300

Introduction

As the *Bluest Eye* provides an extended depiction the effects of internalized white beauty standards in deformation of the lives of black girls and women, it can be summed up as the lack of black representation in media. Although Toni Morrison published this novel in 1970, this issue is still a modern problem to say the least. As a black author herself who had her childhood in 1940's America, writing about this setting not only provided a more realistic approach but also goes to show how she faced these issues in that era as we see her perspective in the character Claudia MacTeer.

With World War 2 in the picture, America was also facing the issue of racial discrimination as well as gender inequality. Although Benjamin O. Davis was appointed as a General in the U.S. Army becoming the first African-American person to hold this position in 1940, it wasn't until almost 3 years when U.S. Congress created several different branches for women to join the war effort. Even with these new, albeit small, improvements, personal accounts do show that gender and race were used against people to discriminate them. With both of these qualities being present as in black girls and women, their lives were perhaps the hardest. As Morrison explains it in the novel "Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders." The themes of construction of beauty and self-loathing that were highlighted throughout the novel, signify some of the ways their lives were made even harder.

The novel starts with Claudia MacTeer's point of view, the narrator who is a 9-year-old black girl living with her sister, mother and father. We are later introduced to Pecola Breedlove the black girl who just wants blue eyes for everything to be "perfect". This is one of the initial stages where the idea of self-loathing is issued onto these young girls by the exclusively white

movie stars such as Shirley Temple that was mentioned in the very first chapter. The point of view then shifts to third person telling the stories of Pecola's life and Breedlove family, later diving into the mother and the father individually. The story also shifts to Soaphead Church who "gives" Pecola the blue eyes. Then we can see that Pecola has lost her mind believing that she had the bluest eyes and talking to an imaginary friend. Claudia is again the narrator in the end giving a metaphor on how if the soil is bad, no flowers will grow; referring to society.

One of the many factors that catches the reader is how Morrison has decided to divide the chapters. By using small parody excerpts from Dick and Jane books, which were learn-to-read children books that Morrison herself used, that were exclusively white and reflected the ideal white family thus, adding into the self-loathing as well as the false notion of "white is pretty, black is not". As the events in the novel takes place in a year, the book is categorized into seasons such as starting the novel with Autumn, when you would expect depressed things to occur whilst it being the best and happiest times of Pecola.

The following approach will be pursued in order to acknowledge the problem of gender roles in an analytical prospect. The setting and the female characters as well as their significance will be examined in retroscope to the themes of construction of beauty and self-loathing. The name of the novel "The Bluest Eye" and its significance will be elucidated with regards to previous contents. Background information on Toni Morrison as well as why she wrote such a book and the similarities between her life and the female characters will be provided in order to understand the historical context. The constant mention of white celebrities will also be scrutinized during the two themes mentioned above, thus getting into the lack of black representation. By going through such topics, this essay will satisfy the following research

question: How are women racially and sexually depicted in the novel “The Bluest Eye” by Toni Morrison according to historical and social context with an emphasis on the female characters?

America: 1940's

As the novel takes place in 1940's United States, the importance of racism and sexism can clearly be visualized. Considering how women were clearly discriminated against their gender in America, the setting holds the significance of highlighting this issue especially through black women. As the author Toni Morrison also grew up in the same time in US, her experiences were inflicted upon the novel itself.

Toni Morrison herself spent her childhood in 1940s America which makes Claudia's experiences more realistic as her approach mirrors that of Morrison's. With this factor included as well, the depiction of characters is not only realistic but also goes to show the real life struggles of Morrison and many other black families. From the perspective of Mr. Breedlove viewed his wife as “... one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch therefore hurt.” Embodiment of women in this perspective is persistent throughout the novel. “... knowing full well she was cut out for better things and could make the right man happy.” underlines the role of especially colored women within 1940s America.

As several exclusively white, female pop culture icons are mentioned throughout the novel, the vision of how unattainable life goals of society are set on African-American girls can clearly be seen. Throughout the first chapter Shirley Temple is mentioned as one of these icons. We see Claudia's will to understand the meaning behind her sister and Pecola's love and admiration towards her but she clearly can't comprehend how they like her so much. Claudia sees the white

privilege all around her. Although she doesn't address it with terminology, her feelings and expression on it clearly underlines the comprehension of this. "... I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world." explains this understanding. As Shirley Temple was one of the major female pop culture icons of the 1940's in America, her mention further highlights the significance of the setting. Both the mention of these exclusively white female pop icons and Morrison's word of choice throughout the novel emphasizes the importance 1940's America has on the discrimination of women regarding their gender and race.

Construction of Beauty and Self Loathing

As the novels' main point is to portray the struggles of black women, there is a variety of different female characters with their own back stories to further highlight the main focus. The construction of beauty is one of the themes that is highly explained through these several different characters.

The main character is Claudia MacTeer who resists the beauty standards set by society. She is not only the narrator of the story but also represents the author. She is clearly disturbed by society's cultural messages that portrays white people as superior. By stating that she destroys and dismembers white dolls and has the impulse to do the same to little white girls, she is defying the constructed system. As it can be seen, she is trying to fight against white privilege. Not only is she ready to defend and fight for her rights, she is also determined to survive in this world which has been built to destroy them. She can't seem to understand how her sister Frieda and Pecola accepts these beliefs, thus getting frustrated towards them time to time. Whilst

talking about white dolls she further explains “I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me.” Although she has the will to fight, how much society enticed self-loathing into young black girls can be seen through her as well. She is a strong character who is willing to defend what she believes is true.

Pecola Breedlove is the character where the effects of self-loathing and unattainable life goals have led to the point of insanity. Throughout the novel Pecola is described as someone who is utterly “ugly”. As the people around her make her believe she is indeed ugly; she starts to have a certain belief that if she had blue eyes everything would be supposedly perfect, her parents wouldn’t fight, she would be pretty and only good would happen to her, explained as: “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, beautiful, she herself would be different. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe 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.”

After getting raped by her own father Cholly, Pecola starts to lose her grip on reality. Later she goes to a fortune teller to ask for blue eyes. The fortuneteller tells her to give some food to a dog, if the dog acts strangely God has accepted her wish and she will be granted that wish the following day, unknown to Pecola the fortuneteller has put poison within the food to get rid of the dog. After seeing the dog start to act strangely, Pecola becomes delusional to point where she believes that she has the bluest eyes out there. Ultimately, she can be seen talking to a non-existing friend about how “blue” her eyes are and people are just avoiding her because they are jealous. After several traumatic experiences mixed with self-hatred caused by white focused

beauty standards, she finally loses her mind hallucinating that she has the “bluest” eyes. Her character is the one where the effects of the beauty standards can be seen extremely clearly, thus being the cruelest. The reason why such effects were displayed so harshly on her despite her age is mainly to explain how the construction of beauty harms the community from a young age. As she was such an innocent figure, the ramifications of the self-loathing became even more confounding.

Frieda MacTeer is the older sister of Claudia. Her bond with Pecola over the 1930s film icon Shirley Temple goes to show her acceptance of white beauty standards as well. As she and Pecola talk about their love and admiration towards Shirley Temple, Claudia’s remarks surprise her considering how much Claudia refuses to accept the society’s beliefs on white supremacy. Claudia explains this incident as “I couldn’t join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley.... So, I said, ‘I like Jane Withers.’ They gave me a puzzled look, decided I was incomprehensible...” Throughout the novel Frieda has been mentioned as someone who likes to stand up for herself, the way she did when a group of bullies were making Pecola uncomfortable. One of the most important incidents that truly starts to shape her headstrong character is when Mr. Henry touches her without her consent and she has the courage to tell this to her parents. Although she cries after her father beats Mr. Henry, it isn’t because she feels guilty of the situation but rather doesn’t want to be “ruined”. Even if their understanding of this situation is rather childish as they think drinking whiskey would prevent them from getting “ruined”, this incident still shapes her character to be stronger. Although she has a rather supporting role, her character signifies how societies’ beliefs have led yet another young girl, Pecola to get obsessed with unattainable beauty standards.

Pauline Breedlove's backstory is given in detail as she is one of the older women figures within the novel itself. She has always dreamed of becoming the perfect housewife. Although she had a slight limp from getting injured when she was small, she loved how her husband Cholly appreciated this feature as something that made her unique. Sometime after Cholly and Pauline got married, Pauline realized how much of a drinking problem Cholly had. Although even after they had two kids, Pauline thought he might get better; he kept getting worse. This led Pauline to try to leave Cholly, after some unsuccessful events she just left him to his own accord. She couldn't have her perfect life so instead she started working for the perfect white family; which she cared for more than her own. Her main purpose in the story is to provide another perspective to the struggles black women went through and still go through these days. Her obsessed perfectionism is one of the many things that led down to her daughter's downfall. Even if it wasn't her "plan" to neglect her children, her neglect was a factor that resulted into Pecola's insanity. She is obsessed with being like pretty white women which has also projected into Pecola as well.

The parody excerpts from Dick and Jane books are used to signify how white-focused the society is. These books were children books that were used to teach youngsters how to read. Every single one of these books offer a perfect white family which enhances the ideology that only white individuals can have a healthy home-life. The excerpts from these books first start with punctuation, capitalization and the spaces used correctly but as the novel goes on these elements start to disappear. This signifies the journey that led Pecola to lose her mind. As it can be seen, she is obsessed with not only blue eyes but the perfect white family illusion as well. The reason why she wants the bluest eyes is due to her belief that obtaining such a white quality will provide her with the healthy family environment she desperately craves for. The contrast created with the Dick and Jane books and Pecola's reality emphasizes Pecola's yearning for the ideal family.

Self-loathing and construction of beauty are both extremely involved with one another. Due to societies beliefs being latched onto black girls they have a very certain idea of beauty, this constructed beauty leads these girls to believe that they are supposed be a certain way which is something they don't think they can have, thus resulting in self-loathing. Through these two themes black women are suppressed from their childhood and brainwashed to hate their characteristic features. This exact event can be seen from especially Pecola and Pecola's mother as they are both affected highly with the idea of beauty which drives Pecola to insanity whilst her mother shows her hatred for herself towards her children.

Oppression Cycle

Most of the characters signify the effects the cycle of oppression has on a racially discriminated community. When a child is oppressed at such a young age, he or she is taught to react with the injustice a certain way such as silence, rage, depression, abuse as Dr. Neelam Bhardwaj explains. As the child continues to grow in the oppressive system, she/he grows to become the oppressor.

Throughout the novel we see how black girls are oppressed by not only the society but their own parents as well. Whilst growing up they are constantly told to internalize the white beauty standards whilst being oppressed on their unique structures. The clearest example of the oppression cycle Pauline Breedlove. As she expresses her class and color with her fashion choices and her southern accent, she is rejected by the women of the Lorain community. Pauline responds to this by taking on the oppressor's role accepting that her color and black features

are something to be despised of leading her to have no care for her daughter who is deemed ugly. As Pecola is born with this ideology of racism and self-loathing, she starts to blame her blackness for everything wrong in her life. Her father Cholly is yet another example of this cycle. As he was having his first sexual experience, he is harassed by white supremacists; this then leads him raping his own daughter. Morrison goes to underline that although no one is born with the qualities of a villain, their oppression from a young age leads them to be antagonists.

This oppression cycle explains the effects of the white beauty standards and self-loathing have. As a black girl accepts white is what makes an individual beautiful, they become oppressed with this internalized ideology. Later on, they show the same oppression on their own daughter as shown with Pauline and Pecola Breedlove.

Name “Bluest Eye”

One of the major points that underlines how women are depicted is done through the name of the novel. The Bluest Eye represents how Pecola loses her sanity believing that she has the bluest eyes out there. Now that she has such eyes she thinks that her life will be perfect but clearly this is not the case. She is portrayed as this innocent girl who loses this characteristic after getting abused by almost everyone in her life just because she is a black girl. This reflects how black girls have things extremely hard which results in them having a very certain belief even when they grow up into women.

Pecola's mother Pauline is one of the major examples that can be given. Whilst growing up she has constantly been told "to be a proper way" and "to please men", after going through such a childhood we see how her developed character reflects on Pecola with the notion that Pecola will never be the perfect white daughter she truly wants. This later on results on her valuing the white children of the house she works at more than her own. As it can be clearly seen she represents the black women who were forced to accept a sense of beauty that caused them to loathe themselves for features they cannot obtain which they later on projected to their child.

On the contrary to Pecola, Claudia is a character who constantly resents these beliefs making her the outlier. Her meaning of the Bluest Eye is mainly with her rejection towards societies' ideals. As her character clearly resents how society changed Pecola by turning her insane, she does not like the idea of "Bluest Eyes" meaning that she does not follow the ideal beauty standard that shows white as prettier.

The Fortuneteller Soaphead Church who supposedly granted Pecola blue eyes signifies how even the black community enhances these beliefs on young black girls. Another aspect of him that relates her to blue eyes is both growing up in a half black and half white household and also molesting young girls. Whilst growing up in that certain environment he has seen both spectrums of society, thus strengthening the concept of "white features are pretty". His perspective on calling Pecola ugly and later on writing a letter to God saying that he gave Pecola something priceless and did something that God couldn't do highlights the role the blue eyes have as they further state the importance of construction of beauty.

Throughout the novel the idea of having blue eyes are associated with white features as well as beauty. From stating several Hollywood stars with blue eyes to mentioning envy towards white

girls with blue eyes, this symbol is used to portray the unhealthy effects of societies' pressure on young black girls. This is further used to depict how strong certain characters are like Claudia despite the pressure whilst also showing another aspect this issue could lead to through Pecola.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye" provides an extended description of the struggles of black women in 1940s America through the female characters by emphasizing the significance of self-loathing, oppression and the construction of beauty.

When black girls are issued the idea that their blackness is what makes them ugly, they grow up to hate themselves. As the society is built against people of color, the black community is oppressed to accept that white features are to be considered beautiful whilst seeing their black physical qualities as flaws. The black girls with this internalized ideology grow up to be the oppressors themselves towards their own daughters. This therefore, leads to yet another generation oppressed by the unattainable beauty standards. Lack of black representation in media with the parents' attitude leads to black women having unattainable life goals.

As seen from the cycle Pauline and Pecola is in, Pecola is driven to insanity due to being oppressed with the idea of having blue eyes would fix everything. In order to understand what actually leads Pecola to lose her mind, the focus and the point of view changes from Claudia's to 3rd person omniscient to tell how Pauline Breedlove become the neglecting mother she is. This signifies that oppression forced onto Pauline is what made her behave the way she did, beating Pecola, psychologically abusing her, telling her she is ugly; all because that's what she

was forced to believe. After getting raped by her own father, Pecola finally loses her insanity and starts to believe she has the bluest eyes. As she had a life filled with agony and pain, her struggles speak directly to the audience; changing the perspective of the reader, Morrison aims to make the reader understand the position black women have.

Claudia, who is also being oppressed with these notions that exhibits blackness inhibits one from being pretty, is struggling against the tide as she is fighting against these beliefs. As she represents the author Toni Morrison, she shows the world in Morrison's perspective. The author Morrison, same with Claudia, is fighting against racism and sexism that heavily existed in 1940's America.

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