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ENGLISH B HL
Category 3 - Literature

Female Characters as Victims of the Society

Research Question: In what ways are the female characters victimized by the society in terms of abuse, beauty standards, race, and psychological effects in the novel *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison?

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I. Introduction

Toni Morrison known for her focus on Black female experience has inspired a generation of writers to follow in her footsteps and is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her first book, "*The Bluest Eye*," tells the story of a girl who desperately wants blue eyes because the society criticizes her for being ugly due to her unfitting stereotype in a society where white people with appropriate beauty standards are appreciated.

The tragic protagonist of *The Bluest Eye* is Pecola Breedlove, an African American girl living in an abusive household in Lorain, Ohio in 1940-41. This work is an important chronicle of the African American experience during the Great Depression, which exacerbated the already poor economic realities for African Americans as they were among the first to lose their jobs. It was women who faced significantly more challenges. With the beginning of World War II, African Americans had the ability to demand an end to racism and were unwilling to give up the minor gains achieved during the war resulting in the 'Civil Rights Movement'.

Even though it takes place before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum, *The Bluest Eye* addresses many of the issues that blacks were advocating for at the time. The story goes into themes related to the 'Black is Beautiful Movement', which sought to disprove the assumption that natural black physical traits were inherently undesirable. The movement also encouraged black people to accept and cherish their unique characteristics rather than altering them through procedures such as hair straightening or skin bleaching.

This background information is relevant to the novel because it is set in Loraine, Ohio, in the years following the Great Depression, and it basically discusses the suffering of African Americans during that era with special emphasis on race, abuse, beauty standards, and its overall psychological effects on the novel's characters (*Pecola Breedlove*; the protagonist of the novel, *Claudia*; a representation of Toni Morrison herself and *Pauline* (*Mrs. Breedlove*); mother of Pecola) who are victims of popular white culture's discriminatory attitudes and pervasive advertising. The specific reason for selecting this research question is that there are significant characters who are

linked to these issues which should be further investigated to better understand the novel's approach and to raise awareness of the past victimized female African Americans.

II. Motifs

The novel begins with a Dick-and-Jane primer “*The Dick and Jane primers taught reading as well as American middle-class values to school-aged children. The storylines described the lives and experiences of a stereotypical American middle-class, white family in their suburban home.*” (Wikipedia), which is distorted by Morrison by running its sentences and then words together. The primer's chapter headings emphasize the contrast between Dick and Jane's faultless and polished upper-middle-class reality and the novel's usually dark and miserable universe. Morrison, on the other hand, does not aim to imply that Dick and Jane's universe is the ideal society standard, in fact, she reflects the primer's negative outcomes upon characters. As a result, the story and the novel provide a contradictory analysis of one another.

Although seasons follow a predictable rhythm, the lives of the characters in the novel do not appear to follow a similar linear pattern of anticipation. The book's four key chapters - ‘Fall’, ‘Winter’, ‘Spring’, and ‘Summer’- assist not only to establish the passage of time, but also to emphasize the difference between the traditional forecasts of each season and the actual course of the narration as well as the characters' encounters.

Pecola's concentration on having blue eyes suggests her vision of herself and the world around her, whereas Mr Yacobowski (the local grocer, a middle-aged white immigrant with a harsh disposition toward tiny black girls) who is hostile to the protagonist, fails to perceive a young black girl's existence. The novel's reoccurring topic stresses the discrepancy between our own perspectives and those of others, as well as the distinction between superficial sight and actual knowledge.

III. Abuse

i. Pecola Breedlove

Pecola grows up with violent and unstable parents. She has no idea what love is or how people behave when they cherish each other, so she assumes love is similar to what her parents are dealing through: *"Maybe that was love. Silence and choking sounds"* (55). This demonstrates that not only has Pecola experienced sexual abuse physically, but also witnessed the reflection of her parents' abusive manners to each other. When Claudia and Frieda (Pecola's sister) show up, Claudia witnesses Pauline's abusive manners towards her own daughter right in front of her eyes: *"Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication... Crazy fool... my floor, mess..."* (107).

Pecola is raped by her own father, Cholly (Mr. Breedlove) in the Spring chapter. It can be claimed that Cholly was dangerously irresponsible in his entire life because he never had a father, or a close relative to stand by him or teach him life, manners, or love. He had no idea what it was like to be a parent or how to demonstrate his love to his child. When he returns home drunk, he does not understand why Pecola is upset and has no idea how to make her happy: *"What could a burned-out black man say to his eleven-year-old daughter's hunched back?"* (159). He couldn't accept her love and wants to break her neck, but *'tenderly'*, *'protectively'*, so he rapes her with the thought of mingled memories of him and Pauline where they were having an intercourse to fulfill the lack of love in their relationship. As a result of this rape Pecola gets pregnant from her own father. This scene is the final time Pecola is sane before she psychologically disintegrates under the effects of this brutal scenario which changes everything. Even Mrs. Breedlove does not believe in her own child when she gets raped twice by Cholly, which we learn in the Summer chapter, evidenced by Pecola and her imaginary friend's dialogue: *"She didn't even believe me when I told her. So that's why you didn't tell her about the second time? She wouldn't have believed me then either"* (198). Therefore, this can be specified as a behavioral abuse and toxicity in a mother-daughter relationship as well.

ii. Pauline (Mrs. Breedlove)

When Pauline is pregnant with Pecola, she and Cholly are also in an abusive and toxic relationship, and Pauline is negatively influenced by it on a daily basis: *“Cholly commenced to getting meaner and meaner. fighting Cholly was all I did” (116-117)*. She watches movies to survive and enjoys the storylines about how great the characters' lives are as Cholly's meanness begins to emerge. He also makes fun of her all the time since she is weary of trying to look like the actresses in the movies and settles down all her features to just being ‘ugly’, thus their conflicts continue all the time and does not end: *“Cholly poked fun at me, and we started fighting again. I tried to kill him. He didn't hit me too hard cause I were pregnant I guess” (121)*.

It can be stated that Pauline oversexualizes herself in order to feel loved by Cholly, which is a perfect model of the 1940's marriage logic where women were fertile and vulnerable, and the men the dominant, and get whatever they wanted, no matter the circumstances. Even when Pauline and Cholly are having sex, she is so lost in the thought that being cared and loved can only come out in intercourses, but not in real life since the connection between the two is toxic most of the time: *“I know he wants me to come first. But I can't. Not until he does. Not until I feel him loving me” (128)*.

IV. Beauty Standards

i. Pecola Breedlove

It is self-evident that Pecola has a deep desire to have the bluest eyes when the novel is analyzed: *“Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (44)*. The society pushes people into the mentality to fit into the beauty norms, both in their lives and selves. The most suffered character from these standards, Pecola, who never got the proper affection from her family, constantly gets lost in her thoughts and thinks that maybe her family would love her more if she had the bluest eyes: *“If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, “Look at pretty Pecola, we mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (44)*. Even the

storybooks which she reads consists of all the ideal beauty norms which drags not only Pecola, but all the young girls into this madness. For example, she admires the look of the girl named Mary Jane who has a bright smile with blond hair and blue eyes on the package of the candy she likes. When Pecola is eating the candy, she also imagines herself eating the eyes, thinking that she could have her eyes. She develops this mindset that her life positivity and perfection depend on her fitting into the ideal standards of beauty.

Furthermore, Pecola's desire to have blue eyes continues to rise when she finally goes to a man named "Elihue", whom people call 'Soaphead Church'. He is believed to be making dreams come true, so she asks if he can make her one desire come true: *"My eyes, I want them blue."* This is not only a representation of a victim girl's innocence upon believing that even a dabbler is able to change her eye color but also her desperation upon changing her appearance in order to be accepted by the society. She gullibly believes that Soaphead Church has granted her wish of having the bluest eyes, which indicates the breakdown of a young girl craving for blue eyes.

ii. Pauline (Mrs. Breedlove)

Images of whiteness pervade the protagonists' experiences, from movies and novels to candies, magazines, toys, and advertisements. Mrs. Breedlove, in particular, spends her days watching movies and idolizing white actresses. This strengthens the idea that beauty and whiteness are inextricably linked and go far beyond physical appearance. Mrs. Breedlove believes that one's beauty (or lack thereof) is a reflection of one's worth and value in society and within one's own family. This distorted perception is a result of the white-centric media's overwhelming influence: *"She was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen"* (120).

Pauline appreciates white beauty and hates her race; however, this closely relates to the ideal beauty standards ruining the individual's confidence and mentality. All the movies she sees are full of white actors with beautiful shape and body, such as Jean Harlow, which Pauline always tries to be like: *"There I was, five months pregnant,*

trying to look like Jean Harlow” (121). Although we always think mainly white people cause others to feel forced to fit in the ideal beauty stereotype and embrace whiteness as a privilege, black people also make others feel uncomfortable with this ideal as a reference to Pauline feeling uncomfortable with the few black women she met.

After Pauline moves with Cholly to a new place with different stereotyped people, such as women with straight hair and nice clothes, Pauline feels the lack of “beauty” and always overthinks upon proving them wrong and make them glance at her because of her magical beauty, therefore she wants other women’s approval to feel accepted enough, which reflects us the corrupted society who only accepts and gets into contact with people who only fit into the beauty standards: *“Pauline felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met. They were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly...She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (116).*

Furthermore, she has reflected what she encountered upon the beauty standards to Pecola and tries to fit her to the appropriate standards of that time, which shows us how her trauma spread to her family connection, especially with Pecola. She is so brainwashed about the standards that she even thinks her daughter is “ugly”: *“A right smart baby she was... But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (124).*

iii. Claudia

At the beginning of the novel, Frieda and Pecola have a conversation about the beauty of the white idol Shirley Temple: *“Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was” (17).* Claudia gets hot under the collar because of this white admiration and the standards of beauty which even Frieda and Pecola joins without knowing, so she keeps denying what they have said: *“I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred” (17).*

In addition, Claudia states that she is bored of receiving doll gifts since their stereotype is all the same, which fits into the beauty standards that she hates the most: *“The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed baby doll”* (18). *“Traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy blue eyeballs, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it, but I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable”* (19).

As implied in the last chapter, Summer, Claudia states that she wants Pecola’s baby to live, just to prove the society wrong upon the stereotypes reflected from famous artists and dolls. This is a representation of Claudia symbolizing the baby as a newborn revolt upon the society’s beauty standards and race discrimination: *“More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live—just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals”*(188).

V. Race

i. Pecola Breedlove

The Breedloves are forced to face the harshest discrimination throughout the narrative. According to the setting of the novel, black people are labeled as "ugly", and are impoverished, so the society pushes them to believe that they deserve this kind of life: *"They lived there because they were poor and black, and stayed there because they believed they were ugly."* Pecola is bullied and lacks confidence in school because of her race, even from her own instructors and classmates: *"The ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike."* *She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk”* (43). Also, when she goes to buy candy, the owner of the shop Mr. Yacobowski ignores her because of her race: *“He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see”* (46). Adding to that, Frieda, Claudia and Pecola are all disturbed by the fact that even a light-skinned girl named Maureen Peal calls them ugly and herself cute which really upsets Pecola and things start to change in the Autumn chapter: *“She screamed at us, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos”* (71).

It can be stated that although the characters are also black, they all act racist upon each other and use it as an insult like it is to be ashamed of, which is an impact of society and its oppressed behavior upon race. Geraldine, a black woman, also is harsh towards her own race. At the end of the chapter Autumn, Geraldine's child Junior takes advantage of Pecola's innocence and invites her to his house claiming he has lots of cats that she can play with, then blames her for hurting the cat to Geraldine. Although Pecola is innocent, Geraldine believes Junior and calls Pecola "*You nasty little black!*" (90), then kicks her out of the house.

ii. Pauline (Mrs. Breedlove)

In the Winter chapter, there are various detailed evidence upon the inner thoughts of Pauline Breedlove and her relationship with Cholly Breedlove. After the two moves in together, Pauline feels like she is not included to this place because there are so many whites, and she does not have anyone except Cholly beside her: "*I missed my people. I weren't used to so much white folks... They could make you feel just as no-count.. That was the lonest time of my life*" (115). Pauline admires white couples and how their men take care of their significant others from the movies she watches and gets lost with the thought of superiority of white norms. She questions her relationship for not being good enough like the whites due to the oppression the society gives upon race: "*White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with bathtubs... them pictures gave me lot of pleasure but coming home, looking at Cholly was hard*" (121).

iii. Claudia

Claudia also is raised in a black family but survives this racism because her family care for each other. It shows us that we are protesting what we do not understand, and we are bathed in white flattery. Unlike Pecola, Claudia manages to survive the harrowing effects of her invisibility. However, she also is victimized with the oppression since she constantly feels rage upon the society, desires to fight against the standards and change them which

deep down haunts her. Claudia is always straightforward in her own words but could not understand why being seen as ‘different’. She thinks she was happy with her skin color before the pressure of the society: *“What did we lack? Why was it important? We were still in love with ourselves then. We felt comfortable in our skins and could not comprehend this unworthiness”* (72).

VI. Psychological Effects

i. Pecola Breedlove

In the last chapter, Pecola finally loses control of her sanity due to her obsession upon having blue eyes and the trauma of her father’s abuse. It is obvious due to her mental state, she casts out nearly all the people around her without even knowing, including Claudia, Frieda, and even her mother who was already distant enough.

She creates an imaginary friend which ensures her that she has the bluest eyes as a backup for real accompany in their dialogues by praising herself and reassuring herself by comparing her eyes with others: *“They are bluer, aren’t they? Oh yes. Much bluer. Bluer than Joanna’s? Much bluer than Joanna’s”* (195). The imaginary friend that she has is a replacement for the reassurance and the comfort she never has experienced from her close ones. Pecola’s mentality upon believing she has the bluest eyes also affects her school success, in which she gets suspended eventually: *“After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes. Well, the next day they had Mrs. Breedlove come out. Now I don’t go anymore”* (195). This indicates how beauty standards affect all women mentally, leading into instability as a consequence of traumas.

Furthermore, Pecola and her imaginary friend talk upon Pecola’s “blue” eyes, however, the imaginary friend gets fed up with the conversation which leads Pecola to feel that she is not enough for her because she does not have the bluest eyes: *“Are you mad at me? Because I don’t have the bluest eyes? Will you come back if I get them? The bluest eyes”* (202). This is a metaphor for Pecola’s family since she believes that if she had the bluest eyes they would cherish her more, reflected onto the imaginary friend.

Based on the evidence, it can be claimed that Pecola is a lonely black girl who suffers from her violent parents, and their ruined marriage, and specifically the forced sexual initiation she has gone through with her father all resulting in her becoming insane. Although she screams for help (represented in her wish to have blue eyes so that she can be supported by fitting into the beauty standards), she is always left alone, all by herself. She finds the solution by creating an imaginary friend where it assures her upon her having the bluest eyes. This is proof that only she and her imagination can make her feel validated and reassured in this toxic environment.

VII. The Title “Bluest Eye”

Pecola equates blue eyes with white woman's beauty and contentment. They also represent her own blindness, as she develops blue eyes while losing her mental stability. It can be stated that every protagonist, particularly women, have needs and desires that the society creates for them, causing them to live in the melancholy of wishes that will never come true, because their appearance, environment, and stability will not change unless the society's standards change and become more equal. Women in this novel are continually chasing their desires to hide away from their fears, demonstrating that self-love is not even attainable in a culture that expects perfection from everyone and treats them horribly if they do not try to fit in.

Frankly, all characters have ambitions and desires that they became addicted to, such as Pauline's desire to be like movie stars, Claudia's obsessive desire to this inequality and discrimination to stop, and Pecola's to the most massive obsession of having the bluest eyes. Although these desires are different, they all stem from the same source: society. As a result, people's desire makes them depressed. Therefore, the symbol of the “bluest eyes” is a representation of the ultimate version of these passions which are turned into obsessions and the only source of being pleased by their lives thinking that the world would turn into a utopic place if these desires were to come true. The title “*Bluest Eye*” reflects women's desires and their distorted minds as a result of their unhappy lives under the burden of world standards.

VIII. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's novel *'The Bluest Eye'* provides an extended description of the struggles of black women in 1940's America through the characters ruined by the society. The idea of being 'black' since they are constantly reminded that they look ugly due to society's oppression, they are forced to hate their appearance and personality while growing up. As the society is built with full of color discrimination and beauty standards, the black community is expected to accept the standards and forced to have the white features, the beauty standards rather than having flaws. As black girls grow up with this oppression, they start to be their own oppressors and carry this to the next generations, which finally becomes a horrifying vicious cycle.

As proven by the characters' infinite loop, the conclusion is reached that there are three varieties of women resulting from society's oppression, which symbolize the diverse mindsets of the victims at the time: 1) women who reflect oppression to others in order to suppress their own insecurities, 2) women who are affected by the reflection of oppression and seek new ways to ensure validation and reassurance in their lives, and 3) women who choose to be rivals in the community, where they cannot get away with the thoughts of being the victim. Eventually, they protest upon society's oppression and settle in a massive fight against these race and beauty norms.

My conclusion is that despite efforts to eliminate them, stereotypes about women persist and have a significant impact due to the influence of the society. These stereotypes create immense pressure on women to conform to beauty standards and contribute to feelings of not belonging, lack of acceptance and empowerment. Women who do not fit into these societal prejudices, whether due to their skin color or physical features, are often humiliated and made to feel inferior. Consequently, many women believe that they would be happy and accepted if they could just meet these unrealistic beauty standards.

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