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Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most prolific African American female writers of the 20th century. Her Nobel Prize in Literature and novel *Beloved* based on the true story of a female slave gained her a wide recognition. Her first novel sprang from a story she started working on in a writers group while teaching at Howard University. In the mid 1960s she incorporated this story into *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison felt that many of the African American literature the time were novels or autobiographies written by male authors with a very powerful and aggressive male driven narratives. Simultaneously, the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement was happening and making loud reinforcements of black beauty. Although that was all well and good, Morrison did not want people to forget the historical disadvantage of African Americans and remind the world that black was not always considered beautiful (NVLP). Thus she felt compelled to write her first novel, the story about Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl whose biggest wish is to have blue eyes, a wish that will drive her into insanity. Influenced by the times of reform when she was writing the novel, Morrison created a story with a young black girl at the center to explore how the intersectional issues of race, gender, and class within a world of internalized racism and beauty ideals influence the most vulnerable member of the community.
I. “The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her”: Morrison’s reasons for writing

The story of *The Bluest Eye* sprung from a conversation Morrison had with a girl while in elementary school. They were discussing whether or not God was real. Morrison believed he was but the girl said she knew that God did in fact not exist. And she had proof of this. She said she had been praying repeatedly for blue eyes but her prayers had never been answered. So at ten years old, Morrison had an epiphany as she imagined how horrible it would be if this girl had blue eyes. It was the first time she discovered beauty, examining the girl she noted: her black skin, high cheekbones and almond shaped eyes. She was beautiful. But something in her, or outside of her, made her wish for something ‘other’ to achieve true beauty (BBC). Morrison, or Chloe Wofford as her name was back then, sensed sorrow in her friend’s voice as she told her about her wish, but could not sympathise. Instead she got mad. What made her think that she was not beautiful? And why did she believe that having blue eyes would make her more beautiful? When in fact it would make her look more like a freak. “Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing” (Morrison, xi). When writing the novel Morrison wanted to investigate where this self-loathing came from (xi).

*The Bluest Eye* contains many autobiographical elements from Morrison’s youth. It is set in the 1940s in Lorain Ohio, at the same time and place where the author herself grew up. Morrison’s parents had moved there from the south in search of a better life, similar to Pecola’s parents in the story. It was the post depression era so Morrison’s family ended up moving frequently because they were unable to pay rent. By the time the Second World War commenced, her father, too old to be drafted, got a steady job at U.S. Steel that attracted many African Americans and European immigrants at the time, finally putting an end to the frequent moving as they could bow but a house. Although
the schools in Lorain were integrated, Morrison grew up around intense suspicion of white people. One of her first black-white encounters was when she witnessed her father attack a white man outside their home and consecutively throwing him down the stairs. In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Morrison reflected on the story, explaining that the strange white man had been lurking around and seeing her father throw him out made him a protector in her eyes, not just against that particular man but against the white man in general. The confrontation made her believe that it was possible for them, her father and black people in general, to win. While studying at Howard University, situated in Washington DC where the buses and high schools were still segregated by race in the late forties, she became familiar with a racial ranking system where students on campus ranked each other by the colour of their skin. Something they called the paper bag test, depending on whether you were lighter or darker than a paper bag, put you in a more or less privileged category within the social hierarchy at the university. Morrison however considered preferring lighter skin over dark to be idiotic (Als).

By the time Morrison wrote *The Bluest Eye* she had been married and recently separated. She was the mother of two children and worked as a publisher at Random House. At night, after her children were asleep, she would write (Als). It was the mid 1960s, a time when the black cultural movement was in full swing. The movement, as their slogan “Black is Beautiful!” suggested, was reclaiming racial beauty by celebrating dark skin, natural hair and other inherent African features. Morrison has explained that although she understood the reasoning for the statement that they were making she was of a slightly older generation that refused to accept that beauty was all there was to humanity. Nothing had changed, black people had always been beautiful. Why the sudden urge to acknowledge it? As she put it, the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement belonged to the white man’s gaze. It was the black community’s way of taking back what white culture had taken from them and using the statement that black
was not beautiful as a way of oppression (BBC). In the foreword to the 2007 edition of the novel, she writes that “the assertion of racial beauty was not a reaction to the self-mocking, humorous critique of cultural/racial foibles common in all groups, but against the damaging internalization of assumptions of immutable inferiority originating in an outside gaze” (Morrison xi). Putting focus on the life of a young black girl, as she herself once was, she thus addresses how a white image of beauty, internalized by the community, influences the self-image of it’s most vulnerable member.

Morrison addresses the white gaze in her novel, not only by criticizing the white beauty standards that make a young black girl feel ugly, but by refusing to address white people. In an interview for the BBC she explained that when she writes she is in a way writing for herself and through that she is writing to black people. She refuses to write for anyone else and especially despises the addressing of white people in other African American literature (BBC). She criticizes some of her predecessors, famous African American writers such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, who she claimed were writing for a white audience rather than a black one. She especially criticised Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*, about an African American man who is rendered invisible due to the colour of his skin. Morrison wondered to whom he was supposed to be invisible. Since he was not invisible to her, a black person, he must have been meant to be invisible only to the white man. She places at the center of *The Bluest eye* the lives of African Americans, and of women in particular. It is a story about black people at it’s core with the white world at the outskirts. Writing from within the black culture, the book is supposed to speak to the people within that culture (Als).

In her foreword Morrison explains how she wanted to “dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause” (xi). She chose to tell the story of Pecola Breedlove because of it’s uniqueness, not because it is supposed to represent the average life of African American women as a whole.
Pecola’s extreme case of sensitivity to her surroundings stem largely from the crippling of her family, who in themselves are crippled as well. Nevertheless, aspects of Pecola’s helplessness is a common factor in all young girls. Without dehumanizing the characters that participated in her demise, the novel “pecks away at the gaze that condemned her” (xi). The aggression Pecola is subjected to both in her society and her domestic life through a series of rejections, cause her to fall apart by the end (xi-xii). Morrison masterfully crafts empathy for every single one of her characters making each one of them relatable so that it becomes hard for the reader to blame them for their actions. In the foreword Morrison explains how she tried “to avoid complicity in the demonization process Pecola was subjected to” (Morrison xii) and for that reason “did not want to dehumanize the characters who trashed [her] and contributed to her collapse” (xii).

Morrison further distances herself from her contemporary writers by putting a young black female at the center of her story, which was something that had not been done before. As mentioned above most of the African American literature written in the sixties and earlier were powerful fiction or nonfiction written by black men focusing primarily on the African American male experience (NVLP). Children, especially black children, had no substantial role within the African American literary world. Children were usually portrayed as a joke or a pet, like the character of Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. In the novel, Topsy, as a black child, is regarded closer to an animal than a human being by various members of her community. Morrison, identifying with that child and having been that child herself, felt compelled to tell the story of Pecola Breedlove and “how something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of society: a child; the most vulnerable member: a female” (Morrison, xi). The story begged its audience to pay attention to this child and listen to what she had to say. She may have been abused and misused,
but her story should be taken seriously nonetheless (BBC). But the story of Pecola could not stand on its own as it was too depressing, so Morrison parallels it with the story of Claudia MacTeer and her sister. Coming from a different background but a part of the same community, Claudia is someone who understands where Pecola is coming from but in contrast to her manages to overcome obstacles that childhood set for her, gaining a new perspective on the way.

II. “Restricted by youth and sex”: An adolescent narrative

Framing the novel within an adolescent world is important to the understanding of the story. This is done in the first couple of chapters of the novel with the establishment of the narrative voice of Claudia MacTeer who along with her sister Frieda befriends Pecola when she comes to live with them for a while after her family is “put outdoors” by her own father (Morrison 18). Although it is the voice of adult Claudia looking back on and describing the events of that year following when Pecola came to live with them, it is her adolescent voice that stands out in the text as she reflects on their relationship with the adults. The girls are never talked to by the adults in the story, but rather talked about by them (Mahaffey). A good example of the invisibility of children within the adult world is when Mr. Henry comes to live with the MacTeer family. Claudia describes how “Freida and I were not introduced to him - merely pointed out” as merely another part of the house, like the bathroom or clothes closet (Morrison, 15). Likewise they did not expect him to say anything. But to their surprise, rather than barely acknowledging their existence, he introduces himself to them, thus breaking the unspoken laws of the adults by engaging the children in conversation and a game (a magic trick with a penny). Later in the story we learn that he oversteps his boundaries further when he sexually assaults Frieda
further representing an adult environment that is hostile towards young girls. “He… picked at me.”(Morrison 99) she tells Claudia finding her crying in bed one day. He had told her she was beautiful and then proceeded to grab her arm and touch her breasts (99).

Through the story of Pecola, Morrison carefully constructs *The Bluest Eye* as an anti-coming of age novel. The coming of age novel, or bildungsroman, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary, is “a novel that deals with the formative years of the main character - in particular, his or her psychological development and moral education”. *The Bluest Eye* moves away from the idea of a character experiencing a series of adventures for the purpose of gaining new and mature understanding as she steps into the adult world, instead portraying a world in which the life of Pecola, a young black girl, is destroyed through a lack of love and affection from her parents and other adults of the community. Through the narrative of Claudia, the text also criticizes the way a society’s race, class and gender bias can affect its children. Claudia resists, and by relating the story to us, vocally criticises the community’s socially constructed ideals that influence its youth, while Pecola silently swallows them until they suffocate her (Mahaffey). Included in the definition of a ‘bildungsroman’ according to Merriam Webster, is that it tends to end in a positive way, where the protagonist learns from the mistakes and disappointments experienced in childhood concluding in a better, more rounded adult life. But nearly everything that happens in the story of Pecola establishes the fact that nobody loves her and when someone finally does love her it destroys her (Gibson).

Pecola’s loss of childhood innocence is exemplified by her hitting puberty. While staying at the MacTeer household she starts menstruating for the first time, a well known turning point in female coming of age texts. In their innocence Frieda and Claudia rely on the menstrual cycle as a symbol of womanhood (Mahaffey). Claudia reflects on Pecola’s new maturity, explaining
“we were full of awe and respect for Pecola. Lying next to a real person who was really ministratin’ was somehow sacred. She was different from us now - grown-up-like” (Morrison 32). Nobody had ever explained to Pecola what menstruation was which is demonstrated through the terror in her eyes as she asks “am I going to die?” (30) when she sees the blood on the porch stairs. Ensuing she gets an explanation from Frieda, who is the oldest of the three, telling Pecola that this means that she can now have a baby. The sister’s excitement indicates that this new ability to have a baby is a good thing, when in fact, it means completely the opposite for Pecola. The scene foreshadows her rape and pregnancy as well as the inevitable premature birth and death of her baby. What happens be the natural and beautiful transformation from girl to woman becomes a curse. A sad and uncomfortable symbol of her demise (Gibson 167-8).

In correlation with coming into womanhood, Morrison proposes an important question within the text: how does a young black girl growing up in a world without parental affection experience love? (Mahaffey). In a pivotal scene at the end of the same chapter mentioned above the girls are lying in bed when Pecola, with her childish innocence and curiosity, asks her friends how she can actually have a baby. Freida, again as the voice of maturity, observes that in order for her to have a baby someone has to love her. After a while Pecola continues the conversation by asking “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (32), to which the girls have no answer. Claudia reflects on her knowledge of what love between a man and a woman looks like which comes from the songs that her mother sings from time to time. The kind of songs about a man that has left his woman and she mourns the loss by singing. Pecola on the other hand lacks a positive image of love between adults. Her parents do not seem to show any affection for each other, even their fighting is devoid of passion. The text illustrates how they fought with “a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking” (Morrison 43).
Likewise, the text repeatedly describes how nobody loves Pecola with the only exception of her father’s expression of love through rape. Nearly everything that happens in Pecola’s life comes back to this question, how to get someone to love her, and when at last she is loved by someone and does indeed have a baby, it is not in the way she was seeking nor how she herself or the reader could have imagined it (Mahaffey).

In her search for what it means to be loved, Pecola befriends a group of whores who live in an apartment above the storefront dwelling where she lives with her family. If the reality of Pecola’s childhood is the affectionless relationship with her parents, her friendship with the whores only adds to the sadness of it, as they become her only positive and real connections with the adult world. Pecola does not have a direct idea of what these three women, China, Poland and Miss Marie, do for a living but they hold the place as her only source of information on topics concerning love and gender politics. Their opinions on these matters are heavily influenced by their own experiences as well as their line of work. They hate men, all men, as well as those women who deceive their men thus instilling in Pecola the belief that no genuine love exists between a man and a woman. Although they are more than willing to share their insights with young Pecola, in fact they are the only adults ready to answer her questions about love and adulthood, the information that they provide her with is not constructive for her (Mahaffey). Morrison writes that the whores were not “protective and solicitous of youthful innocence” as “they looked back on their own youth as a period of ignorance, and regretted that they had not made more of it (66-67). Therefore they are not able to provide any positive information for Pecola, who only seeks to know how to be loved by her parents and the community. Neither can they offer her constructive advice on what it is like to grow up black and female in a society that privileges whiteness and men (Mahaffey).
Additionally it is interesting to take a look at the difference between Pecola and Claudia in the context of adolescence and self image. They are both young black girls of a similar social status, although Pecola’s dysfunctional family and the dwelling of the Breedloves implies that she is somewhat worse off than Claudia. By telling the story through Claudia, Morrison gives her a voice, simultaneously taking that voice away from Pecola. Pecola’s lack of voice and opinion signalizes her passive nature as she silently accepts the values society places upon her until her wish to be something that she is not drives her insane. An example of Pecola’s passivity can be seen in a scene where the girls are sitting on the porch steps trying to figure out something to do. Frieda and Claudia are verbally exchanging ideas when Frieda decides to ask Pecola what she wants to do, to which she replies: “I don’t care, [...] “Anything you want” (Morrison 26). Through Claudia however, Morrison establishes a voice of criticism As the text describes, Claudia feels hostile towards little white dolls because she does not understand what people expect her to do with it.

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs - all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (Morrison 20)

Her desire to find out what it is about the dolls that the world thinks is so lovable drives this feeling of violence that she applies to little white girls as well. She fantasizes about doing the same thing to them as with the dolls but through the horror of the violence learns how to love them. Thus she expresses her understanding that social values, such as having blue eyes, are arbitrary and not existent in nature. The standards of beauty that a society may have are
so powerful that they can influence those members of the society that are not strong enough to resist it (Gibson).

Growing up in this brutal world of rejection, Pecola lacks a sense of self awareness and self love and thus passively takes part in her own destruction (Comier-Hamilton). When confronted with rejection from Maureen Peal, a light skinned girl at school, Pecola “seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing” (73). One day when walking home from school Maureen, Frieda and Claudia see Pecola being harassed by some neighborhood boys. The girls come to her rescue and Maureen even offers to buy Pecola an ice cream. Though after a short while of being friendly she starts interrogating Pecola about seeing her father naked, the very same thing those boys were harassing her about. Pecola fails to stand up for herself so Frieda and Claudia intervene, until it ends with Maureen racially shaming them by yelling: “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I am cute!” (73) Seeing the pain in Pecola’s physical reaction to her insults, Claudia feels an urge to “open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets” (73). The roots of Claudia’s strength can be sourced in her contrasting upbringing to Pecola. Growing up in a loving household made the whole difference. Unlike Pecola, Claudia did not grow up watching her parents violent fights. The MacTeer family lived in a house and not just a storefront dwelling like the Breedloves. Mrs MacTeer stayed at home taking care of her unlike Mrs Breedlove who worked as a maid taking care of another family for a large part of the day. By being raised in an environment that encouraged her to be proud, Claudia is equipped with the powers of self-love, making her able to stand strong against the negative influences of society, something Pecola never had a chance to resist (Comier-Hamilton).

Morrison uses the popular childhood Dick and Jane stories as primer in her novel in order to frame Pecola’s childhood and family life within the ‘classic’ 1940s American image of domestic life. Originated in the 1930s, the
Dick and Jane stories grew popular by the 1940s as the example of American family life and childhood. Like the blue eyed, blond haired baby dolls Claudia hates so much, Dick and Jane are the image of white middle-class suburban family life society was supposed to strive towards. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison opposes this image with the conflicting childhoods and family lives of the Breedloves and MacTeers. Lacking in representation of any other race or class, the historyless Americanness in the Dick and Jane stories caused black urban working-class families to look un-American (Werrlein 56-59). Pecola, and all black children, have been influenced by the values set in the Dick and Jane stories, measuring themselves against these standards that are impossible for them to meet due to genetics and economics (Gibson). Hence the author deconstructs the myth of the ideal American family, exposing the individual elements of the myth as inaccurate but also inapplicable to the African American experience (Awkward 161). At the beginning of the novel, the Dick and Jane primer is repeated three times, the second time without punctuation and the third time without any differentiation between words whatsoever, creating a chaotic and almost incomprehensible jumble of words. The disruption in the primer does not only parallel the chaos and fragmentation of the life of Pecola and her family, but Morrison organizes her text around it, using lines from the primer as headers for chapters focusing on particular members of the Breedlove family (Mahaffey). The chapters focusing on the individual experiences of Pecola’s parents, headed by SEEFATHER and SEEMOTHER, demonstrate the incoherence between the primer as well as demonstrating how degraded individuals reproduce that degradation within their own families. Similarly, when Cholly sees the unhappiness in his daughter’s eyes he wonders what it is that makes her, a unburdened child, so unhappy (Werrlein 60). Unlike happy little Jane, Pecola is incapable of living up to the standards of a society that “defines its own virtue through an ideology of childhood innocence that ironically allows for the expendability of children like [her]”(Werrlein 62).
III. “Nobody loves the head of a dandelion”: Beauty and self-image

The issue of racial beauty has been a subject of black activism since the beginning. American ideas of Black and White can be rooted in ancient European and medieval English ways of categorizing human difference through the polar opposites of white and black, light and dark, beautiful and ugly. But this idea that one was more beautiful than the other was not inherent from the beginning. European explorers in Africa described the beauty of the African women and men they saw; their shining dark skin and bright smiles. It was not until later in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with the occurrence of slavery in the Americas, that dark skin became associated with being less beautiful than light skin. In an attempt to justify slavery, racial difference was reassigned from the environment to the body as physical features were directly linked to character and destiny. Black people were therefore considered inferior by nature because of their appearance. With it arose the idea of beauty: that certain physical features were more or less beautiful than others. Most white Americans viewed European features as the “epitome of physical excellence” (Camp 682). African features then were on the opposite end of what was considered beautiful with their looks ranked closer to primates (Camp 676-683).

The idea of racial beauty has been a hot topic of anti racism activists from the beginning. Since before the Civil War, African American writers debated the image of racial beauty emphasizing on how its connection to slavery had influenced the idea that black bodies were seen as inherently ugly. The image of sick and bent bodies of slaves became associated with all black bodies. Nineteenth century black writers rejected the idea of racial difference as a biological reality instead arguing that the idea of racial beauty was a social construct, deriving either from the environment or white people’s limited imagination. The debate on black beauty continued into the twentieth century with the issue of segregation and how it influenced self image. A breakthrough
discovery was made in recognizing how racial difference influenced self-awareness in black children by way of the Clark and Clark ‘doll tests’. Made in the 1930s and 1940s, scientists Kenneth and Mamie Clark made a study where they showed black children drawings and/or dolls representing either black or white children, subsequently asking them to point out which one represented them. The children largely distanced themselves from the doll or drawing by describing their own skin colour as brown, tan or even purple instead of black, furthermore connecting the black dolls with dirt and ugliness while describing the white ones as pretty, nice and clean. The results showed, among other things, that these children were learning fixed social attitudes towards race alongside internalizing them so that they felt inferior, and uglier, because of the colour of their skin (Camp 683-685).

The generation of children that participated in the Clarks’ ‘doll tests’ grew up to reclaim racial beauty in the 1960s and 1970s with the ‘Black is Beautiful’ movement. At the other side of racial shaming, they celebrated the features they had been taught to feel ashamed for in the past and urged African Americans to honour more authentic styles of self representation. But “white supremacist beauty ideals were never quite dismantled” (Camp 687) no matter how much people celebrated their hereditary culture. In 1974 a research by one sociology student revealed that although white skin was not necessarily favoured over black, ‘brown’ skin was rated as most desirable (687-688). Morrison, writing *The Bluest Eye* at the time contributed to, as well as criticized, the cleverly acronymed ‘BIB’ movement with her portrayal of the discovery, and downfall, of a young black girl’s self image as she compares her herself with those around her. Morrison further demonstrates how environmental factors influence black individuals and their perception of racial inferiority, including how racism and capitalism come together to establish an idealization of whiteness within the African American community (Khan 26).
Morrison primarily roots Pecola’s racial self-loathing in her parents. In the chapter introducing the Breedlove family she sets the form of internalized racism that Pecola’s parents, and therefore Pecola herself, are subjected to. The text shows how and why they were so ugly, reading “although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique. But their ugliness was unique. No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly” (Morrison 38). Furthermore explaining how their ugliness derived mainly from conviction, Morrison establishes an outside force of discrimination writing “It was as though some mysterious all knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” (39). Subsequently, they found nothing to contradict the fact that they were inherently ugly, instead they found “support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance” (39). The text repeatedly describes how the blackness of the Breedlove’s becomes a form of economic incapacity, determining their ugliness in relation to blackness and poverty. Their incapacity to attain the ideals of a society that associates beauty with whiteness makes them internalise racist attitudes, illustrating an African American community that is influenced by the idealization of whiteness in western culture (Khan 26).

Pauline, Pecola’s mother, is one of the characters that impact Pecola’s self image, inducing in her the form of self loathing. In the book Morrison gives the reader insight into Pauline’s past, who as a young woman “felt uncomfortable with the few black women she met (Morrison 118). Coming from the south, she looked, talked and dressed differently than the women around her. In an effort to be accepted within the community she feels compelled to change her looks and how she dressed to the way the community deemed acceptable. Morrison writes how “the sad thing was that Pauline did not really care for clothes and makeup. She merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (Morrison 118). Moreover, in an effort to escape from her unhappy marriage Pauline starts finding joy in going to the movies.
There she discovers romantic love as well as an image of physical beauty that further affect the framework of internalized racism. “Both [love and beauty] originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion. In equating physical beauty with virtue, she stripped her mind, bound it, and collected self-contempt by the heap” (Morrison 122). The self-contempt Pauline experiences derives from films portrayal of a restricted image of beauty known to make women feel insecure about the colour of their skin, hair or their figure (Khan 26). Morrison depicts Pauline’s abandonment of these beauty standards in a descriptive scene where she does her hair like Jean Harlow, the star of the movie she is going to see. When in the theatre she loses one of her front teeth by biting into a piece of hard candy, marks the point where she gives up trying to be something that she is not and settles down to just being ugly (Morrison 123).

_The Bluest Eye_ demonstrates how images of standardized beauty influence a community by establishing unconscious desires. Placed in a postmodern society, where capitalism revolves around creating utilities and desires that function within a racist domain, the novel demonstrates how racism and internalized racism exist due to idealized images of whiteness. The text distinguishes the link between beauty, racism and capitalism in several different, but equally destructive instances (Khan 26). In addition to the influence of Hollywood films on Pauline’s self image, Morrison uses a popular child star of the 1940s, Shirley Temple, to establish an object of desire in Pecola. When first introduced to Temple at the MacTeer household, in the form of a cup with the picture of Shirley Temple on it, Pecola becomes mesmerized by the image of her. Morrison writes that “she was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face”(Morrison 19). Similarly, after being racially shamed by the shopkeeper Mr. Yacobowski, where Pecola purchased three soft caramel candies called Mary Janes, she concentrates on the yellow wrapper that each has a picture of Mary Jane on it. Her “smiling white face. Blond hair […] blue eyes” (Morrison 50) stare at
Pecola as she eats the candies. Just like Shirley Temple the girl pictured on the Mary Janes, spark within Pecola the desire to become like her. The text goes on to describe how, by eating the candies, Pecola imagines that she is eating Mary Jane, the girl and her eyes through which she feels as though she is becoming Mary Jane (50).

Morrison also proposes the complete antithesis to Pecola’s racial self denial in the character of Maureen Peal. Described as the “high-yellow dream child with long brown hair braided into two lynch ropes that hung down her back”, Maureen “enchanted the entire school” (Morrison 62). Same as through the connotations of Dick and Jane, the image of Jean Harlow or Shirley temple Morrison uses Maureen to justify Pecola’s belief that if she looked differently, somehow more like her, she would be treated differently. Maureen is loved by all the teachers as well as respected by her peers at school. Both black and white kids seem to leave her alone, they do not trip her in the hallways and they always flock to sit with her at lunch time (62-63). She is not treated this way merely because of her economical superiority, but because of her ‘whiteness’: the light skin, brown hair and green eyes that make her look more white than black. There is a direct link between economic gain and light skin within the African American community as the chances for a black individual to gain both social and economic advantage is related to skin colour. The lighter the skin, the more one resembles the dominant white beauty images present in the society, the better chance one has of success (Comier-Hamilton). In a community that prefers light skin over dark Pecola’s belief that her life would be better if she looked more like Maureen Peal or Shirley Temple, or if she had the eyes of Mary Jane on the candy wrappers, is confirmed.
IV. “Quiet as it’s kept”: Shame and trauma

Like other postmodern novels that deal with the themes of race, class and gender, *The Bluest Eye* describes the environmental impact of a community on an individual’s potential. One cannot read African American literature without considering how the physical and social environment can influence the individual’s nature and their potential for surviving and succeeding in the world (Firdous 434). Morrison describes how Pecola’s character is influenced both by white racism and internalized racism within her community, as well as sexism and classism. Being black, female and impoverished Pecola is the most vulnerable member of society. At the end of the novel Claudia looks back and explains how,

> The soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We were wrong, of course, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late. (Morrison 206)

In the last sentence Morrison makes a statement about how the societal environment should not fail in nurturing flowers like Pecola Breedlove. Because she never experienced love from others she lacked the strength to love herself, and without self-love, “love for one’s cultural identity” (Comier-Hamilton), it becomes difficult for vulnerable members of minorities to resist the impact of the dominant culture (Comier-Hamilton).

Pecola’s childhood lacks a place where she feels safe and loved as neither her home nor the outside world provide that for her (Firdous 434). At home, with her parents constantly fighting, Pecola prays to God that she may disappear, imagining one part of her body disappearing at a time, until
everything disappears but her eyes, where she keeps all the pictures, all the faces (Morrison 45). “Restricted by youth and sex” (43) she has given up on running away in an effort to escape the hostile situation, which is what her brother Sammy does. Pecola’s desire to disappear is also suggestive of her natural reaction to shame. Because shame is directly connected to exposure, disappearing gives its victims an outlet to disassociate themselves from it either through forgetting parts of themselves and/or their lives, or by altering their character, as in Pecola’s wish for blue eyes. She places all hope in a miracle, that if she had blue eyes, all attitudes towards her will change (Bouson).

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes [...] 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, “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.” (Morrison 46)

In her wish to disappear and in the wish to have blue eyes, Pecola shows the first signs of her “experiences of depersonalization” (Bouson), her estrangement from herself and the community (Bouson). At the end of the novel Pecola has become delusional, believing that her wish has come true. Talking with an imaginary friend, that is herself, she argues about having the bluest eyes: “But suppose my eyes aren’t blue enough? Blue enough for what? [...] Blue enough… for you!” (Morrison 203).

Furthermore The Bluest Eye shows the intergenerational transmission of shame from parent to child in which Pecola’s parents pass on to her their own feelings of shame and humiliation (Bouson). Morrison illustrates how her mother, Pauline, is alienated from her own culture and the role as a mother and wife. Instead of caring for her own family she places all of her nurturing love in
taking care of the white family where she works as a maid and cook. The separateness is created, among other, by the daughter of the white family calling her by the nickname Polly, while her own children always address her as Mrs. Breedlove. Pauline leads a very religious life that results in her cold domineering attitude towards her children and in battling her husband in an attempt at convincing him “that he is a sinner whose sole cannot be redeemed” (Mahaffey). An example of Pauline’s alienation is nowhere more present than in a scene set at her employer’s house where Pecola, visited by Frieda and Claudia, accidentally spills a freshly baked blueberry pie all over the newly cleaned floor as well as all over herself. Pauline, seems not concerned whatsoever about the wellbeing of her daughter, showing no hint of concern for the burns that caused her to scream out in pain but “with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor” yelling “crazy fool … my floor, mess ...” (Morrison 109). After beating her she throws her out and succeeds to comfort the daughter of her employers. Later in the novel, after discovering Pecola on the kitchen floor, her underwear hovering around her ankles after her father brutally raped her, Pauline’s response is to beat her instead of showing compassion (Awkward).

Similarly by raping Pecola, Cholly plays the role of the humiliator, the “enraged father who projects his own shame onto his daughter” (Bouson). Abandoned by his mother and rejected by his father, Cholly is unable to acknowledge what it means to be a parent. “Having no idea how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” (Morrison 160). Inflicting on his daughter his own feelings of humiliation and shame, his behaviour replicates the experience of his first sexual encounter, when two white hunters force him to “perform sexually” (Bouson). Powerless and terrified, Cholly directs his hatred towards the girl, Darlene, instead of the hunters. Similarly by raping Pecola, he makes her the target of his humiliated fury (Bouson). When he sees her from the back as she is washing the dishes, her shame and humiliation
visible in her posture “back hunched that way; her head to one side as though
crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow” (Morrison 161) he cannot but
wonder why she looks so unhappy. His powerlessness concerning her misery
makes him angry. But his anger is blended with tenderness as he watches her
scratch her leg with her big toe, reminding him of the time he first met her
mother and she did the same thing. Compelled by his feelings, he wants to “fuck
her--tenderly” (Morrison 163). As a result of the ultimate traumatization by
rape, Pecola faints, signalizing her physical and mental paralysis (Bouson).

In the hostile gaze and words of the community Pecola finds confirmation
of what her parents have taught her to believe, that she like them is ugly.
Morrison describes Pecola’s trip to a small grocery store that sells penny candy.
On her way she observes the dandelions at the base of a telephone pole and
reflects on why people consider them to be weeds. To her they are pretty but no
one seems to like them (Morrison 47). In the “total absence of human
recognition” (Morrison 48) in the white shopkeeper’s eyes is not the first time
Pecola experiences a white man’s contempt directed towards her, but there is
something in the vacuum in his eyes that concerns her. She, on the other hand,
does not interest him at all, as he looks right through her. She is used to see
“interest, disgust, even anger” (Morrison 49) in the eyes of white men. But
behind the vacuum in his eyes lies disgust, the kind of disgust that must be
directed towards her (49). Back outside Pecola is overflowing with shame from
her interaction with the shopkeeper and in an attempt at overcoming it she takes
a “temporary refuge in anger” (Bouson). “Anger stirs and wakes in her; it opens
its mouth, and like a hot-mouthed puppy, laps up the dredges of her shame”
(Morrison 50) but as she is reminded of the shopkeeper’s eyes her shame “wells
up again” (50) and she wants to cry. If before she did not understand why
people did not think dandelions are pretty, looking at them now she affirms that
“‘They are ugly. They are weeds.’” (50). She is the dandelion and no one likes
her.
The text describes how humiliated individuals can temporarily clear themselves of shame by placing their humiliation onto someone else. In this case the African American community, burdened with racial shame and anxiety ends up collectively scapegoating Pecola, making her the victim as they transmit their shame onto her delicate self image (Bouson). Scapegoating is the result of an individual’s or community’s necessity to get rid of their own feelings of guilt by projecting it onto an outside problem instead of dealing with it as an inner problem. The guilt feeling is externalized and consequently perceived as ‘Other’, through which an individual or group can clear itself of the ‘shadow’ that exists within them. For this ceremony to be successful, the scapegoat must be “visibly imperfect” (Awkward 190), embodying the source of the shadow. Accordingly the shadow is frequently an alienated individual of a minority group (Awkward 190). This is demonstrated in the text where a group of black boys surround Pecola on her way home from school. They form a circle around her in a type of sacrificial ritual where she is their victim (Morrison 65). By insulting her appearance and family circumstances via chanting “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnekked” (65) they show their ignorance of the fact that they are really reflecting their own skin colour, and possibly their own personal family circumstances (Awkward 191). They are unable to recognize, as Claudia puts it, their “smoothly cultivated ignorance” (Morrison 65).

*The Bluest Eye* depicts a type of ‘self-contempt’ where the individual splits herself into categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ within a society that has typically placed her in the ‘bad’ category based on her “failure to achieve the ideal values and standards that have been set up [...] as exclusively desirable” (Awkward 191). When Pecola encounters Geraldine, an African American middle class woman, she is met with a look of contempt. Geraldine is framed within the text as an upper middle class ‘brown girl’, one of those who refuse to succumb to the black stereotype by internalising “white, middle-class standards
of beauty and behaviour” (Bouson). Morrison creates a vivid image of the ‘superiority’ of these women in the way they smell “like wood, newspapers, and vanilla”, how they “straighten their hair” and “sleep with hands folded across their stomachs” (82). In an effort to rid themselves of the ‘Funk’ as Morrison puts it, these women “do not drink, smoke, or swear, and they still call sex “nookey”(82). The encounter between Pecola and Geraldine pays attention to the relationship between class and shame within the African American community. Geraldine looks at Pecola and instantly feels like she knows this girl. Wearing a torn dress and muddy shoes Pecola embodies everything Geraldine detests as she represents the kind of black poverty that women like her have tried really hard to detach themselves from (Bouson). By calling her a “nasty little black bitch” (Morrison 92), Geraldine shames her into becoming what she herself is trying not to be and reinforces Pecola’s belief that she is ugly and dirty (Bouson).

Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* exemplifies how the issues of race, class and gender intersect and contribute to the demise of a young black girl living in a society that privileges whiteness over blackness. The novel is in a way Morrison’s contribution to the black empowerment era of the 1960s, influenced by autobiographical aspects from her own childhood in the 1940s. Due to intraracial shaming, lack of parental affection and prolonged exposure to trauma, Pecola Breedlove is robbed of the chance to grow up, instead rendering her delusional and incapable of surviving in an adult world. Furthermore Morrison uses the examples of children’s literature, toys and films to show how an African American community has internalized racist values and end up collectively scapegoating Pecola in an attempt to rid themselves of their own
shame. In addition, Pecola Breedlove’s lack of parental affection further takes away from her the power to love herself. Her wish to have blue eyes lies in her belief that they would grant her what she is missing: love and attention. When in reality they are the result of the impossible standards society has placed on her. By writing the novel Morrison has created an outlet for Pecola to be seen and heard thereby raising awareness on how the society fails in nurturing individuals like her.
Works Cited


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