

Shattered Gazes and Steadfast Voices: Pecola and Claudia as Opposing Mirrors in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

This paper examines Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* through the contrasting figures of Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer, interpreting them as symbolic opposites who represent divergent responses to racialized ideals of beauty. While Pecola internalizes the dominant cultural belief that whiteness defines beauty and value, Claudia develops a critical consciousness that resists such ideological impositions. Through this narrative juxtaposition, Morrison reveals the psychological violence inflicted by hegemonic aesthetic standards and the social structures that sustain them. Drawing on perspectives from Black feminist criticism and race theory, the study argues that Pecola's tragic collapse reflects the destructive consequences of internalized racism, whereas Claudia's narrative voice functions as an act of ethical witnessing and cultural resistance. Morrison's fragmented narrative structure and polyphonic voices further illuminate the complex intersections of race, gender, and childhood within African American experience. Ultimately, the novel not only critiques oppressive beauty hierarchies but also foregrounds the transformative power of memory, voice, and storytelling in reclaiming identity and dignity.

Keywords: Gaze, Race, White Ideal, Trauma, Resistance.

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) presents a searing critique of racialized beauty standards and their psychological toll on Black girls in mid-20th-century America. Through the juxtaposition of Pecola Breedlove and Claudia MacTeer, Morrison constructs a narrative of opposing mirrors—one shattered by internalized racism, the other resilient through critical voice. This paper examines how these characters reflect divergent responses to societal pressures, exploring themes of trauma, silence, resistance and narrative agency. According to Muhammad Ali Khan et al,

Throughout the novel there is contrast between Claudia and Pecola as well as their concept of life is concerned. Pecola was influenced by the white beauty all the time she dreamed to have blue eyes. The atmosphere in which she survives is boring as a result her hate for the black community and desire to have white beauty becomes more serious. On other hand Claudia has no desires to be white, but she hates the white. When she receives a blue-eyed doll at Christmas, she is not pleased to get it. (575)

Set in 1940s Lorain, Ohio, *The Bluest Eye* captures the pervasive influence of white beauty ideals on Black identity formation. Morrison critiques the cultural saturation of whiteness through symbols like Shirley Temple and blue-eyed dolls, which serve as ideological tools that teach Black children to despise their own features (Morrison, 1970). The poverty and social alienation of Breedloves, the parents of Pecola intensify her self-hatred, while Claudia's family, though economically disadvantaged, provides emotional support that fosters resilience. Morrison's narrative implicates not only white society but also the Black community's complicity in perpetuating these ideals (Awkward, 1990). Muhammad Ali Khan et al opines,

Through *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison not only critiques racial segregation but also advocates for cultural pride and the liberation of Black women, key aims of the Black Arts Movement, ultimately challenging the hegemony of White beauty standards and restoring dignity to Black existence. (573)

Cheryl Harris argues, Pecola's longing for blue eyes symbolizes her desire for visibility and acceptance. Her belief that beauty will transform her experience reflects the tragic logic of internalized racism: "It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes...were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different" (Morrison 46). Her silence throughout the novel signifies erasure. She is spoken about but rarely heard, rendering her invisible even within her own community. Cholly Breedlove's rape and the community's indifference to her pregnancy underscore the systemic failure to protect vulnerable Black girls (Mbalia, 1991). Pecola's descent into madness—believing she has acquired blue eyes—is both a symptom of trauma and a desperate attempt to reclaim agency. Her psychological break reveals the devastating consequences of societal rejection. According to George Yancy, "Morrison demands that we uncover the secret of Pecola's 'ugliness,' the hidden etiology of her psychopathology, turning our critical gaze toward the constituting activities of whiteness." (301)

Claudia offers a counter-narrative of resistance. Her rejection of white dolls and Shirley Temple reflects an instinctive defiance against imposed beauty standards: "I destroyed white baby dolls...The true horror was the hatred of the dolls...the hatred of Shirley Temple" (Morrison 22). As both child and adult narrator, Claudia embodies emotional intelligence and moral clarity. Her reflections on community failures and her own complicity demonstrate a capacity for empathy and introspection (Christian, 1985). Unlike Pecola, Claudia survives by retaining her voice. Her narration frames the novel, transforming memory into a tool for healing and resistance. Pia Kohler says,

Claudia, the retrospective narrator of the novel, displays great female insight and intelligence. ... Claudia is a rebel who feels the need to change the whole social order. She is only 10 years old at the time of Pecola's destruction; yet, she is deeply impacted

by her friend's plight. Claudia critically dissects the community's corruption and ignorance. (36)

Morrison constructs Pecola and Claudia as symbolic opposites. Structurally, Claudia's coherent narration contrasts with Pecola's fragmented presence. Psychologically, Pecola internalizes hatred; Claudia externalizes it. Pecola Breedlove and Claudia Mac Teer serve as symbolic opposites in *The Bluest Eye*, with their contrasting traits illuminating Morrison's critique of racialized beauty and identity. Pecola's gaze is shattered and inward, reflecting her internalized belief that she is unworthy of love or visibility unless she conforms to white beauty standards. In contrast, Claudia's gaze is observant and outward, marked by a critical awareness of the cultural forces shaping her world. Where Pecola's voice is silenced and fragmented—rarely heard and ultimately lost in madness—Claudia's is articulate and reflective, anchoring the novel's narrative and offering insight into communal complicity. Their responses to racism diverge sharply: Pecola internalizes the hatred directed at her, believing that blue eyes will redeem her existence, while Claudia resists these ideals, questioning the logic behind them and refusing to accept the inferiority imposed upon her. These differences culminate in opposing outcomes—Pecola's descent into madness and erasure, and Claudia's survival through introspection and voice. Morrison observes, the extremity of Pecola's case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family - unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator's. But singular as Pecola's life was, I believe some aspects of her vulnerability were lodged in all young girls. In exploring the social and domestic aggression that could cause a child to literally fall apart, I mounted a series of rejections, some routine, some exceptional, some monstrous. . . (BE 210-11)

Through this contrast, Morrison constructs a powerful dialectic between destruction and resistance, silence and storytelling, and the fragile boundaries of Black girlhood under the weight of white supremacist aesthetics. Symbolically, Pecola represents the casualties of

racialized beauty standards, while Claudia embodies the potential for resistance and healing (Krumholz, 1999). Concerning the point that whiteness is a form of property, Cheryl Harris argues, Morrison's narrative exposes how racialized beauty functions as a disciplinary cultural system that shapes subjectivity, compelling marginalized individuals to internalize hierarchies of worth based on proximity to whiteness. By granting narrative authority to Claudia, Morrison transforms storytelling into an act of cultural resistance, demonstrating how memory can challenge dominant aesthetic ideologies and restore dignity to marginalized histories. Cheryl Harris observes,

For the first two hundred years of the country's existence, the system of racialized privilege in both the public and private spheres carried through this linkage of rights and inequality, and rights and property. Whiteness and property was the critical core of a system that affirmed the hierarchical relations between white and Black. (1714)

To fully appreciate Pecola and Claudia as opposing mirrors, it is essential to situate their experiences within the intersecting frameworks of race, gender, and childhood. Morrison's portrayal of Black girlhood is not merely symbolic—it is a political act that challenges dominant narratives of innocence, beauty, and agency. Pecola's body becomes a site of social projection—her perceived ugliness, her victimization, and her silence are all imposed upon her by external forces. Claudia, by contrast, resists these projections, asserting her own interpretive authority. Scholars such as hooks (1992) and Collins (2000) emphasize how Black girls are often denied the cultural protections of childhood. Pecola's rape and subsequent ostracization exemplify this denial. Morrison critiques this through Claudia's retrospective narration, which mourns Pecola not only as a friend but as a symbol of communal failure. "We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her inarticulateness was the death of her, and the silence of her world was our shame" (Morrison 205). This passage underscores the ethical imperative

of bearing witness, which often interrogates how literature can serve as a counter-memory to dominant cultural erasures. Susmita Roye says,

The disturbed girlhoods of Toni Morrison's disrupted girls most powerfully register her angry protest against a gender system that designates a woman a secondary rank and against a social system that effortlessly overlooks what befalls a poor (black) female child. (212-13)

Morrison's critique extends beyond white supremacy to include intra-racial hierarchies, particularly colorism. Pauline Breedlove's preference for the white baby she cares for over her own daughter reflects how proximity to whiteness is valorized even within Black communities. Claudia's rejection of these hierarchies is significant. Her disdain for white dolls and her confusion over adult admiration for Shirley Temple reveal a nascent political consciousness.

Claudia's role as narrator is a radical act of reclamation. By framing the novel through Claudia's voice, Morrison subverts traditional narrative structures that privilege omniscient or white perspectives. Claudia's voice is subjective, emotional, and morally engaged. Her narration functions as cultural memory.

Morrison's aesthetic choices—fragmented structure, poetic language, polyphonic voices—reflect an ethical commitment to representing trauma without exploitation. Pecola's story is mourned, contextualized, and framed by Claudia's empathy. Morrison's use of multiple voices and nonlinear structure enhances the thematic contrast. Voices like Pauline, Cholly, and Soaphead Church contribute to a mosaic of trauma and complicity. Claudia's voice provides coherence, while the fragmented chronology reflects the disorientation of trauma (McKay, 1988). Morrison's poetic language—flowers that refuse to bloom, eyes that cannot see—creates a symbolic landscape that deepens emotional resonance.

The Bluest Eye is not just Pecola's story—it is Claudia's reckoning and ours. Pecola's shattered gaze reveals the psychological violence of white supremacist ideals, while Claudia's

steadfast voice offers a path toward healing. Morrison's narrative invites readers to confront uncomfortable truths, amplify silenced voices, and reimagine beauty and belonging beyond inherited norms.

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