



Creating and Challenging Race: Racism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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ABSTRACT

Morrison uses historical context, character development and narrative structure- three different ways to view the story. She explains how systemic racism affects Black people, their communities and their self-esteem. The research paper analyses how Morrison shows racism as an established social system which determines beauty standards, family relationships, male and female behavior and self-destructive behavior. The paper examines *The Bluest Eye* through textual analysis and major African American literary studies and critical perspectives which demonstrate that racism operates as a social system that creates traumatic experiences, self-disconnection and community participation in violence against Pecola Breedlove. The use of retrospective narration shows how racist ideology gets created and maintained through its storytelling methods. Morrison uses the inner experience of a Black girl who faces social exclusion to demonstrate that readers and communities must address and eliminate all systems which perpetuate racialized meanings.

1. Introduction

The *Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison has maintained its status as an essential work of African American literature since its release in 1970 because it explores fundamental questions of race, identity and power relations. The first novel of Morrison introduces the major themes that will shape her complete writing career through its exploration of how racism creates psychological damage and how Black communities function and how storytelling affects collective memory. Henry Louis Gates Jr. contends that Morrison's



early fiction sets up a tradition of Black narrative authority that challenges prevailing racial discourses. Instead of presenting racism as separate instances of hatred and discrimination, Morrison shows it as an active social system that penetrates daily existence to determine how people perceive themselves and others. The novel presents its main character Pecola Breedlove who believes that blue eyes will help her win affection and social acceptance which shows how society's racist beliefs become internalized by people.

The *Bluest Eye* presents racism as a socially constructed belief system that uses beauty standards, family patterns, gender norms and community relationships to operate. Morrison shows that racism affects Black communities through external sources while Black communities create their internal racism through their acceptance of colourism and class distinctions and respectability standards. The novel shows how she internalizes societal expectations which lead to her complete mental breakdown. This study shows how Morrison uses the historical context and character development and storytelling elements of the novel to show how racist beliefs work at different levels like social communal and psychological. In this way reinforcement is accelerated. Deborah E. McDowell calls it “everydayness of racial domination” in Black life

2. Historical and Cultural Context of Racism in the *Bluest Eye*

The historical setting of *The Bluest Eye*, which takes place in the early 1940s, functions as an essential element that helps readers comprehend the depiction of racial discrimination. The United States during this time period experienced persistent race-based segregation, economic disparity and violent racial conflicts that continued to affect all parts of the country including the northern state of Ohio which serves as the location for the story. Despite not experiencing the same degree of institutionalized racial segregation as those in the American South due to Jim Crow legislation, the characters encounter racial bias in their access to housing, employment, education, and cultural representation. Morrison establishes this context because she wants to show that racial discrimination exists throughout the United States because it has become part of the country's social systems.

The novel shows how racial beliefs develop through three cultural forces which include cinema, advertising and popular literature. Historians of African American culture observe that this era saw the escalation of representational racism via mass media, advertising, and film, which further solidified whiteness as the ideal of beauty and morality (Bogle; Lipsitz). The images of Shirley Temple and Hollywood romance together with white middle-class domesticity create a definition of beauty and happiness. The visual depictions establish whiteness as the standard while Blackness represents a



departure from that standard. Morrison later explained that she wanted to research how cultural messages shape children's self-identity. They do not see Black as beautiful or worth. The novel demonstrates how mass media creates cultural control, which leads to the establishment of racial power structures in society. Through her use of a specific historical time period Morrison demonstrates how racism has remained present throughout history until today. The novel demonstrates that although racial violence now appears differently than before, white supremacy systems that benefit white people continue to exist. The historical knowledge of the novel enhances its critical analysis because it shows readers that Pecola's suffering results from social problems that have existed for a long time.

3. Beauty Standards as a Mechanism of Racist Oppression

The *Bluest Eye* presents its main racist theme through dominant beauty standards which connect whiteness to virtuous character, desirability and affection. The association of blue eye, blond hair and light skin with happiness and moral value establishes a standard that treats dark skin and Black features as ugly and shameful. The racist beauty standards are one of the most visible forms of oppression in *The Bluest Eye*. The preference for white physical characteristics—blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin—is a cultural script that determines value and lovability. As Maxine Leeds Craig and others have argued, beauty is a form of social capital in racially divided societies, which favors whiteness. These associations operate as aesthetic preferences which serve to establish existing racial power structures. Morrison shows this point through the novel's opening which parodies the Dick-and-Jane reading primer. The white nuclear family appears in cheerful form as a universal and ideal representation which excludes Black families from the normal category of existence.

Pecola's fixation on blue eyes represents the internalization of these beauty ideals. Her desire is not simply to be physically transformed but to be seen differently by the world. The blue eyes she wants to obtain will make her lovable while protecting her from violence and creating a sense of belonging. Deborah McDowell and Patricia Hill Collins both state that Morrison employs the discourse of beauty to show how racism is embodied and emotional, influencing the desires and self-perception of black girls. Therefore, beauty in the novel is not merely a cosmetic issue but a tool of psychological domination. The societal system that rewards whiteness while punishing Blackness makes her desire for blue eyes appear to be a reasonable choice. Pecola's longing shows how racism controls social systems and creates fundamental human desires.

The rejection of white dolls by Claudia MacTeer during her childhood creates a contrast with Pecola's process of internalizing white beauty standards. Claudia first refuses the dolls because she believes they



represent values which she cannot accept. Her opposition becomes impossible to maintain because of the strong cultural forces which press down on her. The beauty standards which exist in society show through her narrative but she finds it hard to create new ways of thinking about them. Through these contrasting responses, Morrison demonstrates how racial ideology maintains its strength while showing a fragile way for people to fight against it.

4. Internalized Racism and Psychological Self-Alienation

The novel presents its most destructive theme through the concept of internalized racism. Morrison demonstrates that when characters experience continuous racial hatred they begin to develop negative self-perceptions about their identity. Frantz Fanon's concept of internalized colonial oppression is a relevant tool for analyzing Pecola's desire to change her looks in order to be recognized as human. Pecola develops the belief that she possesses an inherent ugly nature and lacks worthiness so others treat her with indifference and cruelty. The teachers dismiss her presence, the shopkeepers show her contempt and her classmates tease her about her looks. Pecola learns to view herself through these common social exchanges which show that people acquire racist views through standard social behaviors.

Pauline Breedlove's story demonstrates how people develop their beliefs through internalization. Pauline uses white beauty standards which she learned from movies and popular culture to measure her own appearance against those standards and those of her family members. She dedicates herself to the white family she works for while she fails to take care of her own house and daughter. The internalized social system causes Pauline to treat white people with higher value than her Black identity which results in her inability to show empathy and caring. Through her character development Morrison shows Pauline as a tragic character who develops her nature through the discriminatory effects of institutionalized racism. Valerie Smith and Bell Hooks suggest that Morrison presents internalized racism as both a tragedy and a failure, which involves the whole community in Pecola's pain. The novel reaches its peak through Pecola's mental collapse which results from her internalized racial discrimination. Her delusional belief that blue eyes have been bestowed upon her provides her with an escape route from the unbearable situation. The escape route leads to the loss of mental stability which demonstrates how racist beliefs cause severe psychological harm. The mental breakdown of Pecola represents a social critique because it shows what occurs when society fails to provide a child affirmation and dignity.

5. Family, Community, and Complicity in Racism



The Bluest Eye depicts Pecola as the main character who suffers from racist attacks while showing that racism exists as a system which receives support from people throughout society. The MacTeers show two opposite reactions because they both defend their home and help maintain its existing conditions. Claudia's family members give her physical support yet Claudia needs to grow up before she can explain other ways to measure beauty outside of racist standards. The community's total inability to save Pecola from mistreatment demonstrates that white supremacy exists through both racist people and those who choose not to challenge oppressive systems.

The character of Geraldine further illustrates middle-class assimilation to dominant racial values. Geraldine's respectability politics are another example of this phenomenon. Geraldine's refusal to be "improper" in her blackness reflects mainstream racial ideologies which reinforces her exclusion. It demonstrates how respectability politics function in the Black community to strengthen existing racial power structures. As Morrison writes, Geraldine "liked to separate things—not by virtue but by preference" (Morrison 95), suggesting that her values mimic those of the dominant white culture. The critics who include Michael L. Herrnstein argue that Morrison demonstrates how racism spreads throughout society by showing how community fragmentation leads to social disintegration. The Bluest Eye shows that all characters within the story experience racial prejudice which impacts their lives despite their efforts to combat its most harmful effects. Patricia Hill Collins suggests that respectability is a survival tactic that maintains the very oppressive ideologies it seeks to escape. The complicity of the community, therefore, is an important mechanism by which racism maintains itself.

6. Narrative Structure and Racial Meaning

The fractured narrative form of *The Bluest Eye* also serves to underscore the text's critique of racism. The multiple narrative voices of Morrison's novel subvert traditional notions of narrative linearity, underscoring the fractured identities created by racist ideologies. According to narratologists such as Gérard Genette and African American literary theorists, such narrative techniques serve to subvert the dominant representational practices. Morrison's selection of storytelling method deepens *The Bluest Eye*'s examination of racial discrimination. The novel presents three distinct perspectives which include Claudia's childhood memories and an all-knowing historical account and Pauline's personal narrative. The broken narrative structure of the story reflects how racist systems create fractured identities for their victims.



The historical prologue which explains the Breedloves' pain through greater racialized beauty and normalcy myths transforms personal suffering into institutional analysis. The epistolary and testimonial forms that appear throughout the text emphasize how racist ideology is recorded, repeated, and internalized. Scholar Deborah E. McDowell notes that Morrison's narrative establishes racial meaning through social systems while the text itself functions as an opposing force that reveals the stories which support racist beliefs. *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates through its storytelling that racist discourses receive different treatment depending on who controls the story.

7. The Role of Gender in Racial Oppression

Though this paper focuses on racism, it is important to acknowledge that Morrison does not separate race from gender. Pecola's suffering is at once racialized and gendered: as a young Black girl, she confronts racism that intertwines with sexist devaluation of female bodies. Morrison's portrayal of sexual abuse highlights how intersecting systems of oppression intensify trauma. Morrison's examination of racism cannot be considered in isolation from gender. Pecola's pain is symptomatic of what Kimberlé Crenshaw has termed intersectionality—the simultaneous operation of racial and gender subjugation that specifically impacts Black women and girls. Rape in the text highlights the vulnerability of Black women's bodies within a racist patriarchal framework.

Racist beauty standards in the novel are gendered, shaping expectations about female attractiveness. Pecola's desire for blue eyes is inseparable from desiring acceptance as a woman in a society that privileges white femininity. As scholar Barbara Christian argues, Morrison's narrative “exposes how sexism and racism coalesce in the psychic realm, producing a unique form of Black female suffering”. Though beyond the central scope of this paper, this intersection enriches understanding of how racism functions within broader systems of discrimination.

8. Resistance and Narrative Possibility

Morrison shows resistance through her work because she shows racism in her writing. Claudia uses her story to challenge main cultural beliefs through her active rejection of white dolls which she sees as beautiful. Claudia's adult life shows she understands how race influences her identity and her relationships with others. Pecola's story becomes an act of defiance through its process of being told. Morrison uses a Black girl's inner experiences to challenge literary traditions which treat Black characters as unimportant. Scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. has argued that Morrison's work “insists on the



complexity and dignity of Black inferiority, even in the face of pervasive racism”. The novel's presence directly opposes all stories which claim that Black people do not possess human qualities. Through the narrative of Pecola, Morrison presents a form of dignity to a life that was denied recognition. Gates and Morrison herself suggest that the Black narrative is a form of cultural survival that resists the racist epistemology that refuses to acknowledge complexity and humanity.

9. Conclusion

Toni Morrison demonstrates through her novel *The Bluest Eye* that racism functions as a cultural system which defines beauty standards and shapes individual identity, family relationships and communal traditions. Through complex narrative strategies and richly drawn characters, Morrison reveals how racism becomes internalized and normalized, producing psychological trauma and collective complicity. Yet the text also gestures toward resistance—through narrative voice, memory and the very act of storytelling. Morrison’s novel exists as a powerful study of how racism causes harm which shows that literature can effectively challenge and examine systemic injustice.

This work portrays racism as an omnipresent and systemic phenomenon that influences the definition of beauty, the construction of identity, family relationships, and social interactions. However, through its innovative narrative and psychological complexity, Morrison’s work reveals the ways in which racism is internalized and made normal, leading to deep trauma. Nevertheless, the novel also asserts the importance of narrative as a means of resisting dehumanization and maintaining black inferiority. The relevance of *The Bluest Eye* resides in its ability to shed light on the ways in which regular cultural practices perpetuate racial injustices. By bringing these issues to the fore, *The Bluest Eye* urges the reader to recognize their own complicity and to envision alternative ways of seeing and being.

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