

Amy Badenmiller

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“The Most Destructive Idea”:

The Influence of Gender in *The Bluest Eye*

Susmita Roye’s article, “Toni Morrison’s Disrupted Girls and their Disturbed Girlhood: *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*,” examines both Toni Morrison’s first novel and her latest (at the time the article was written) in regards to how and why Morrison portrays the young, black females the way she does. Roye makes the argument that Morrison’s goal is to bring attention to the often overlooked “underdogs of a racist social order,” meaning black girls, who are seen as the “lowest” because of their race, age, class, and gender (212). When it comes to the characters of Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola and their girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*, Roye distinctly separates the concepts of race and gender. Roye accredits Pecola’s longing to change her appearance through obtaining blue eyes to her race and only discusses Pecola’s gender as being an issue of subjugation when it comes to Pecola’s rape by her father and the physical and emotional abuse she receives from her male peers. While Roye is correct that Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is related to her race, there is also a large component that is driven by her gender. Being female, what is often considered the weaker gender, adds an additional pressure to Morrison’s characters who already are an established minority because of the color of their skin. Morrison shows this pressure not only in how men treat Pecola but in how she views herself. With the combined pressures from the media and society, gender becomes just as influential as race in developing and complicating the black female’s perception of herself as Morrison shows through the character of Pecola with her desperation and confusion in regards to her appearance.

Naomi Wolf introduces the idea of the “beauty myth” in her book under the same title. This myth encompasses the idea of a culture’s belief that “Women must want to embody [beauty] and men must want to possess women who embody it... [because] females must be ‘beautiful’ to be selected to mate” (12-3). Pecola embodies this concept as she starts to focus more and more on her appearance and the appearance of those around her. She begins to be molded by what her surroundings tell her. However, Pecola does not equate beauty with only the love of a man; she equates it to love in general. While discussing how to make babies, Pecola reflects on what Frieda tells her about the necessity of love in order to get pregnant: “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (32). This innocent question shows that Pecola feels unfamiliar with the idea of being loved. She is under the impression that a person must somehow do something in order to receive affection. This makes sense considering her father is an abusive drunk, and her mother is also abusive and inattentive. Having the naiveté of a child, Pecola relies on the only sources she has available in order to receive an answer to her question: other female influences and the media.

After World War I and the influx of films that were distributed, the sale of cosmetics and fragrances had skyrocketed in the 1920s, grossing more than seven times what it did at the beginning of the century (Hill 93). As the film industry grew in popularity, so did the concept of beauty consumerism. Women of any race eagerly became entranced by the fantasies they saw on film, embracing the belief that even if they could not obtain exactly what the actress had as far as glamour and romance, at least they could look like her (93). However, it becomes more complex when the woman is black because she has to strive for more than just the figure, hairstyles, and makeup of these beautiful actresses; she must also strive for their skin color. In *The Bluest Eye*, there is one character in particular who embodies this concept of longing for beauty through film and she also happens to be Pecola’s mother. In observing the behaviors and actions of Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola cannot help but be influenced and learn to follow and believe the same concepts as her mother.

Before Mrs. Breedlove has Pecola, she becomes obsessed with going to the movie theater and watching the films over and over again. In doing this she discovers “physical

beauty. Probably the most destructive idea in the history of human thought” (Morrison 122). Morrison acknowledges that the concept of beauty is what tears up the human psyche because it is unattainable. Already displaced in a new town where she does not have any friends and believes they mock her for her looks, Mrs. Breedlove turns to the picture shows as an escape from her lonely and unhappy life. In observing those films, she begins to have a change of perception: “She was never able, after her education in 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” (122). Now having acquired this means by which to judge appearances, it only makes sense that Mrs. Breedlove would want to enhance her own. Being unable to afford expensive cosmetics, Mrs. Breedlove does the next best thing and styles her hair in the same way as the platinum blonde actress, Jean Harlow. However, Mrs. Breedlove does not get to continue living her fantasy within the movies; she is jarred awake by the loss of a front tooth. To further her embarrassment and seal the concept in her mind that beauty equals importance, Cholly begins to tease her for her now “less attractive” appearance. This enhances her feeling of inferiority tied in with the value she has put to beauty which ultimately shatters her self esteem, leaving her to say: “Everything went then. Look like I just don’t care no more after that. I... settled down to just being ugly” (123). This value system is then destined to be passed on to her daughter, who is introduced upon birth as being “ugly” (126).

Young girls are influenced by what they see while growing up. When it comes to anything related to being female, it makes sense that a girl would look to her mother. Hill explains this as: “In observing their mother’s beauty regimens, girls receive explicit instructions on acceptable female behavior” (206). Pecola’s mother does not necessarily have a beauty regimen because she gave up on her appearance after losing that tooth. However, Pecola can still observe her mother’s behavior when it comes to what she views as beautiful, and Mrs. Breedlove clearly has many opinions on that. Even though Mrs. Breedlove inwardly admits that she cares for her kids, she never actually lets them know that: “Sometimes I’d catch myself hollering at them and beating them, and I’d feel sorry for them, but I couldn’t seem to stop” (Morrison 124). However, Mrs. Breedlove is exceptionally kind

to the little, white girl who is the daughter of the Fishers, the people she works for. She either ignores or beats her own daughter yet comforts and croons to her white charge, saying things like, “Hush, baby, hush,” when the white girl gets upset (109). The only real difference between the two girls is their appearance; one is seen as white and pretty and the other is black and believes she is ugly. Therefore, it makes sense that Pecola justifies her mother’s favoritism solely on appearance and believes that if she only looked more like the white girl, her mother’s treatment of her would change.

Following her mother’s influence, Pecola turns to film in order to find a way to define beauty as well. However, instead of focusing on adult actresses, Pecola sets her sights on a girl her own age: Shirley Temple. Shirley Temple, a beloved child actress who was at the peak of her fame in the 1930s, was known for her sweet disposition and charming appearance that melted the hearts of many audiences, apparently including the MacTeer family who owns a cup with her face on it. Geraldine Pauling explains that the 1930s United States’ fascination with Shirley Temple was sexual, stating: “To males [Temple] is both an object of identification and simultaneously a projection resulting in role reversal... To females, the sexualized child represents the favored and adored daughter...” (307). Pecola definitely sees Shirley Temple as Pauling describes, as a young girl everyone clearly adores, including Pecola herself. Despite not having clear evidence to say where this adoration comes from, Pecola believes it must stem from Temple being so “cu-ute” (Morrison 19). Having seen her own mother worship a cute, little white girl, of course Shirley Temple must be worshipped too. Upon being given the Shirley Temple glass, Pecola “gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (19). She grows so enamored with the cup that she takes every opportunity to drink from it despite the risk of angering Mrs. MacTeer by wasting milk. Pecola internalizes this newfound definition of beauty to the point where she begins to apply it to not only herself but to other females as well, like her mother does.

Pecola’s first one-on-one encounter with someone she believes fits the definition of beautiful happens with a girl her own age, Maureen Peal. Being of mixed race, Maureen has light skin and light, green eyes. Because of this, “she enchanted the entire school” so that teachers and fellow students of both races are kind to her and want to be around her (62).

Pecola and Maureen meet after Pecola has been teased by some black boys, and Maureen distracts Pecola by discussing Pecola's favorite topic, female celebrities. The girls talk about the hair and appearance of white actresses like Hedy Lamarr and Betty Grable, and Pecola begins to show more and more interest as the conversation goes on (67-70). This discussion of beauty with a girl she deems beautiful helps seal in Pecola's mind that she is putting value in the right female attributes since a pretty girl does it too. However, their friendship is short lived because Maureen decides to ask Pecola about whether or not she has seen her father naked. The argument that ensues among Frieda, Claudia, and Maureen ends with Maureen shouting, "I *am* cute! And you ugly!" (73). Thus, Maureen effectively shames Pecola by first making Pecola feel inadequate as a female in general because she has seen her father naked, something a "respectable" female would never have experienced, and then by asserting Pecola's assumptions that her appearance is unattractive. If Pecola had previously been uncertain about her thoughts on appearance, it has certainly been confirmed for her now. By ending the argument with insults on appearance, the "enchanted" Maureen has made Pecola feel that the entire unpleasant situation all boils down to looks and that attractiveness is equivalent to superiority and winning. However, if this wasn't enough to skew Pecola's perception of herself, the encounters she has with adult women certainly seal the deal.

A large female influence, aside from her mother, in Pecola's life are the prostitutes who live above her. They tolerate Pecola, which is more than she gets in her own family, so Pecola looks up to and admires these women, opening herself up to their influence. Not fully understanding their occupation, Pecola believes that all the men who visit the three women must love them. Of course, she finds them fawning over and discussing their appearance when she goes to see them. China is constantly doing her hair, Poland is taking care of her clothes, and Miss Marie tells Pecola that the reason men love her is because she is "rich and good-lookin'" (52-3). Thus, Pecola has the concept that one must be attractive in order to obtain love confirmed in her mind. Therefore, if you don't get a man's love, you must be ugly, which is proven by the prostitutes' insults for each other: "bandy legs," "fat," and "old" (52). The women use these insults as reasons for why they do not always get customers, so Pecola believes that their appearance is what earns them the men's "love."

Being exposed to this negative language, Pecola begins to believe that it is normal to judge and put value on others' appearance as well as her own.

However, the prostitutes never directly insult Pecola, unlike the “pretty milk-brown lady,” Geraldine (92). After getting abused by Junior and feeling rather traumatized, Pecola meets yet another woman who is obsessed with appearance. In fact, Morrison dedicates several pages to describing women like Geraldine:

They ... dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skins with Jergens Lotion They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side. At night they curl it into paper from brown bags, tie a print scarf around their heads, and sleep with hands folded across their stomachs. (82)

Even though Morrison is talking about numerous women, she presents them as though they are all the same person. In making these generalizations about what these females do to alter their appearance, Morrison essentially makes the statement that their striving for this outward perfection does not make them unique like they think but actually makes them just generic cutouts with no originality. Morrison also shows the unhappiness these women feel as they follow this lifestyle of impossible standards. They lose their “funkiness,” which is defined as “passion,” “nature,” and the “wide range of human emotions” (83). Since women like Geraldine never allow themselves to look or act in any other way than what is expected of them, they never truly feel happiness or fulfillment. Sadly, Pecola does not think of it in this light and only sees Geraldine as a beautiful woman living in a beautiful home. This “attractive” woman then calls Pecola “nasty” and tells Pecola to go away (92). Thus, Pecola is rejected by yet another female, and the words used to get across that rejection mention appearance, so that Pecola is reminded of her inadequacy as a proper female.

Like the films that influence Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola, and Maureen, advertisements play off of female appearance as well and use the woman's feeling of inadequacy as a way to make profit. While the idea of the beauty myth has been in many societies, particularly Western, for a very long time, it really took off when advertising became much more geared to the consumer. After the American Civil War, there was a second industrial revolution

caused by advances in technology and distribution, which led to the desire to create a mass market that would consume all the new goods being created (Hill vii). “The first step in a marketing strategy was to identify and understand who the customers were and how to target them... mothers, wives, and daughters were unquestionably the consumers in their households...” (vii). Since women were often housewives at the time period, it made sense for marketers to target them because they were the ones who were making the decisions as far as what was brought into the house in regards to food, cleaning supplies, clothes, etc. However, the advertising barrage did not really take off until the full appeal of the quest for beauty was discovered.

Once women realized they wanted to live out the fantasy of looking like the glamorous actresses they saw on television, advertisers saw the opportunity to make money off of the average woman’s feelings of inadequacy. Advertisements began to display only the most “attractive” of women and gave the impression that if a woman did not look like the ad, then there was something wrong with her. Ads also showed beautiful women obtaining things such as men, attention, glamour, money, etc., such as the 1935 ad for Camay Soap that portrays a woman getting intimate attention from two men at the same time with the caption: “My But You’re Lovely” (Hill 108). The woman has perfectly styled hair framed by a fashionable hat, a visible blush on her cheeks, and a dress with a neckline that shows off her pale, flawless skin. The two attractive men lean towards her, clearly both vying for her attention with looks of awe on their faces. Ads such as this implanted into the consumer woman’s psyche that she would receive similar things if she used the same products and looked the same. If a woman that went against such established gender expectations was shown in an ad, it was often portrayed as a source of shame. An example of this is the 1939 Listerine ad with the heading of “I Only Had Myself to Blame” showing a woman losing her man to another woman all because she had not used Listerine mouthwash to freshen her breath (121). This ad shows a woman with rather disheveled hair and a baggy coat walking in on a handsome man kissing a woman with well-styled hair and a very slimming and appealing dress. The most striking aspect of this ad is that it emphasizes the idea that it is completely the woman’s fault if she does not live up to the beauty standards of her gender.

As a woman continually observes such ads that tell her she is inadequate, she begins to believe it. Pecola is no exception; her exposure to an ad allows the reader to really see her warped perception as Morrison takes the reader into Pecola's mind.

Advertisements are not shown as frequently in the novel as film, but Morrison does show that she is aware of advertisements' effects. When discussing the Breedloves' appearance, Morrison says,

It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had accepted it without question They had looked around and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance... (39)

Morrison is indicating that the Breedloves have decided to see themselves as ugly based on what their surroundings, particularly media and peers, tell them. As shown previously, Pecola greatly takes to heart what she sees through film and fellow females. However, we see the greatest influence when Pecola encounters the advertisement that comes in the form of the wrapper on the candy known as Mary Jane.

After being treated horribly by the shopkeeper from whom she bought the candy, Pecola has a fleeting moment of anger. She feels rage at the injustice of her treatment, and it is the first and only time where the reader could feel some hope for Pecola to begin to change her views. However, the anger does not last and is replaced by shame because her attention turns to the candy in her hands, the candy with a pretty, blond, blue-eyed girl on each wrapper. In looking at the candy and the ideal it presents, Pecola is unable to hang on to the resistance she briefly felt. Instead, she decides to eat the candy because "To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane (Morrison 50). It is easier to embrace the idea of worshipping an image that the rest of society has deemed acceptable and preferable than to go against all of the pressure she has experienced through her surroundings. Pecola embodies what the advertisers hope will happen to women consumers as they see the ads: the women believe what the ad tells them and then literally buy into it in the hopes of obtaining what the ad promises. At the time period when this novel was set, the cherubic, blond girl was a common icon for many brands. In the 1930s,

Campbell's Soup used a cartoon of a blond girl to advertise their products, having her say, "My rosy cheeks and winning looks are really due to Campbell's cooks!" (Hill 283). The little girl looks into a mirror and blushes and smiles at her own reflection, turning her head so that her blond curls can be seen in two mirrors. The Mary Janes give a similar message to Pecola: Mary Jane looks as desirable as she does because of the candy.

As she eats each piece, Pecola's experience also becomes sexual: "Three pennies had bought her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane. Lovely Mary Jane, for whom a candy is named" (50). This shows that Pecola's longing to become like Mary Jane has escalated from simple admiration to sexual fantasy. If these idealized women and girls are the only things worthy of love and desire, then Pecola believes she should love and desire them in the same way. This instance is one of many in the novel that shows a young girl's confusion and fascination with sex. Morrison is highlighting the idea that the media and society do not solely focus on beauty when it comes to female expectations, they also focus on sexuality. Like beauty, sexuality also serves to define a female's identity. Pecola and the other girls in Morrison's novel are no exception.

Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola repeatedly become fascinated with anything related to sex, always wanting to know more details in order to become more knowledgeable on the subject. They are intrigued by the female anatomy such as when Claudia suggests that they could look at Mr. Henry's "girlie magazines" and when Frieda and Claudia are filled with "awe and respect" when Pecola begins to menstruate (Morrison 26, 32). Even though the girls do not understand fully what menstruation is, they see it as a rite of passage into womanhood. Their belief that menstruation is "sacred" implies that they place value in becoming a woman. Pecola senses that she is now different from her friends, but it is described as "distance" (32). This brings forth the idea that menstruating actually makes Pecola feel more out of place than she did already, bringing more confusion and uncertainty in her life because she is not sure if she wants this change in her body or not. It does not help that no one really explains what is happening to her. She is only told that she is now able to have a baby, and in order to make that baby, "somebody has to love you" (32). This

brings back the question that was mentioned before of how to obtain love and puts even more pressure on Pecola to obtain that love.

Pecola also shows interest in the act of sex, as shown when she goes to prostitutes when she has questions about love and when she watches her parents have sex (53-7). She believes that love is shared between the prostitutes and the men they have intercourse with, so it makes sense that Pecola would believe that sex is a large defining point of love. When trying to determine what love looks like between two people, Pecola recalls when she had observed Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove having sex in a bed near hers. She once again does not seem to fully understand what their actions mean, but equates it with love because she has never seen anything else that resembles love to her. Thus, Pecola believes that love is gained through appearance and shown through sex. However, this view becomes complicated when Pecola's father rapes her. Already having the belief that sex is unpleasant based on her mother's silent reaction to it, Pecola most likely sees her rape as something similar to what her mother frequently experiences with Cholly. Describing her experience as "horrible," Pecola inwardly struggles to come to grips with what happened as she goes back and forth in accepting that the rape even occurred (198-200). This event is the main trigger that causes Pecola's psychological break not only because of how traumatic it is but because of how it further skews her perception of her identity. Pecola has finally received what she naively thought she wanted: an act of love (i.e. sex) from someone. However, she understandably finds the experience traumatizing and not at all what she wanted, which causes her initial belief system to cave in on itself. Not having the capacity to comprehend what has happened to her or how to properly cope with it, Pecola goes into her own mind and provides herself with her own solution, the solution she wanted all along: blue eyes. Based on all of her past experiences, she still believes that fellow females and the media hold the answer to her problems. Her life would be more pleasant and less painful if she only looked like what her surroundings tell her she should.

Morrison's portrayal of this confused, desperate, and broken character does not only shed light on issues of race but also on issues of gender. In being enveloped in a consumer-based and hegemonic society, Pecola's struggles to obtain her identity as a female are

representative of what most females go through regardless of their race. Through Pecola, the reader sees how society and media sculpt and influence females from a very young age and force them into gender archetypes based mostly on appearance. While *The Bluest Eye* is certainly a book that provides a lot of insight into the struggles of a young, black woman in regards to her race, Morrison is also suggesting that there is more to a young girl's definition of identity, which is what makes the struggle of Pecola's character so striking: her poor self-perception goes much deeper than the color of her skin.

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