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The Soil is Bad for Certain Kinds of Flowers: Dominant Cultural Narratives and the Impact of Community in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Senior Paper

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By *Savannah Bowman*

Thesis Director
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Dee James

The common approach to reading literature in secondary and higher education makes the move away from a focus on reader emotions and reactions to a focus on literary theory and deconstruction. Scholar Jerome Bump in his article “Racism and Appearance in *The Bluest Eye*: A Template for an Ethical Emotive Criticism,” discusses how this shift is detrimental to critical thinking because “emotions often generate more energy for reform of race, class, and gender inequities than abstractions” (147). By aligning white readers with the experiences as depicted in the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison asks them to occupy the space of the other. Toni Morrison’s rich, velvety language makes readers of all races identify with the strife and struggle of these girls and women in the novel. Bump, in his article, makes the argument to include the novel in curricula in order to arouse a feeling he refers to as “compassionate grief” as opposed to the typical “pity” that is often felt by white readers of this novel. Educators can see the appeal to using this novel as a means of spurring authentic dialogue because the novel itself discusses the erasure of identities and the indoctrination of toxic ideals on undeserving communities by means of movies, advertising, and other commodities.

School anthologies, according to scholar Ruth Rosenberg, did not depict African American girls for almost all of the 20th century (435). American educator, Barbara Dodds Stanford, writes that “Whites Only’ could have been stamped on almost every series for high school students published before 1965” (11). Nancy Larrick conducted a study of “5, 206 children’s books published between 1962 and 1964” and found that “only 349 of those thousands of books include even one black child either in the illustrations or the text” (Rosenberg 435). This information is telling of the privileging of the Anglo-Saxon experience and the exclusion of the African American experience in educational materials. The lack of an African American presence in textbooks is troublesome because it is one of the mediums through which

information and values are disseminated in an institutional manner. Educational systems are not the only means of disseminating values and ideals, but it is a system that indoctrinates children from when they are very young—often cementing principles and stereotypes at an early age. When a culture's presence is ignored, it puts those within the culture at the margins and renders them invisible—and such is the case for the female characters in Toni Morrison's 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*.

Toni Morrison, a critically acclaimed American author sets her first novel in the 1940's in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio and writes about the peripheral existence of adolescent African American girls. It is through the narrator, Claudia MacTeer, that readers see the development of Pecola Breedlove, a young girl with no community ties and a broken family life. Claudia and her sister Frieda encounter Pecola when their mother takes her in as a ward of the state. Her father tries to burn their house down and her mother stays with the white family she is employed by, leaving her in the care of another family. As adolescents, both the MacTeer sisters and Pecola live different lives despite their similar circumstances. However, the MacTeer's, as a result of their community, are a part of a higher social class than the Breedlove's. It is because of this higher standing that the MacTeer sisters are able to avoid the madness that comes quickly for Pecola Breedlove who is so bombarded with images of whiteness and entrenched in cultural narratives. The privileging of whiteness in 1940's America contributes to Pecola's destructive self-image and copious amounts of self-hatred. Instead of blaming an adolescent girl for her downfall, this thesis will posit that it is the prescribed cultural narratives present in advertising, cinema, and literature that cause the demise of Pecola Breedlove. She internalizes her self-hatred and the narrator describes her sense of entrapment: "walking up and down, up and down her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on

shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach [...]” (204). The comparison to a grounded bird emphasizes the control that dominant cultural narratives have on Pecola’s life.

The narratives that are most often heard are those that work within a hegemonic framework; hegemonic ideals are representative of the cultural power that one group has over another. Antoni Gramsci, an Italian Marxist, expands upon Marx’s theory of hegemony and brings it into the realm of culture. According to Gramsci, the dominant class diffuses ideals throughout the entire society by means of institutions. According to scholar David L. Sallach, “the process that Gramsci describes is one in which a dominant class, which controls the economic and political institutions of a society, also possesses privileged access to the primary ideological institutions of that society (religion, culture, education, communications media)” (41). Gramsci theorizes that the dominant class then “uses its privileged access to ideological institutions to propagate values which reinforce its structural position” (Sallach 41). Because of the power of the dominant class and their access to institutions, they use their power to disseminate values that espouse their position—thus quelling alternative views and narratives that do not uphold the ideal.

The term cultural narrative is one that can mean many different things depending on what needs examination. In the context of this thesis, I am discussing cultural narratives in terms of a “collective representation of disembodied types of actors” (Loseke 663). Cultural narratives often create “categorical identities associated with families, gender, age, religion, and citizenship” (663). Donileen R. Loseke, a professor at the University of South Florida and scholar writes that cultural narratives can also be known as public narratives, cultural stories,

master narratives, or schematas depending on which theoretical framework one is working under. Although there are different names, according to Loeseke, they are all referring to “narratives of typical actors engaging in typical behaviors within typical plots leading to expectable moral evaluations” (664). In her essay, “The Study of Identity as Cultural, Institutional, Organizational, and Personal Narratives: Theoretical and Empirical Integrations,” Loeseke asks who is responsible for writing these cultural narratives and contends that politicians, media, and social activists are some of the authors of these narratives. However, there are those whose stories are ignored such as African-American women (665). Only people belonging to a certain racial, cultural, or socioeconomic group are writing the narratives that are disseminated to the public and the narratives that do not align with a hegemonic ideal are often disregarded or not included at all. If thought about in this context, cultural narratives are written, most often, by those who are in power. It is their power that allows their stories to be deemed credible, therefore they are the ones most heard.

One dominant hegemonic ideal and dominant cultural narrative that continues to be heard throughout the lives of many Americans is the myth surrounding the ideal, American family. When Morrison employs the Dick and Jane readers at the beginning of *The Bluest Eye* and throughout the rest of the novel, she is placing the Breedlove’s and the MacTeer’s in a position where readers can compare the three families. These primers have created a narrative heard by many school-aged children in schools during the mid 20th century. William Elson and William Gray’s grade school primers, popular in the 1930’s and 40’s, created an image so iconic that it lasts even to this day. In the primers, Elson and Gray illustrate families who overcome the struggles of a troubled America plagued by war and economic hardships. In Werrlein’s essay, “Not so Fast, Dick and Jane: Reimagining Childhood and Nation in *The Bluest Eye*” she

examines the historical implications of the primers, looking at what messages are sent to the readers by the lack of an African American presence. She contends that the “primers in general never allude to events such as conquest, slavery, immigration, or exclusion. In fact, beyond the occasional appearance of a ‘savage’ Indian, they never feature nonwhite Americans” (58). The primers also isolate color, gender, and poverty to places outside of suburbia, thus making people with these variations un-American (Werrlein 58). The lack of an African American presence tells readers of the primer that people who do not belong to the white, middle-class are people not worthy of being read about—thus erasing them from educational instruction in the early 20th century.

One of the ideals propagated by hegemonic norms is that of the family structure. The Dick and Jane primers are a prime example : “Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house [...] See Mother. Mother is very nice. [...] See Father. He is big and strong” (3). The cultural hegemony prescribed upon African American communities makes the household in which Pecola Breedlove resides, dysfunctional to say the least. Pauline and Cholly Breedlove are not the first image that comes to mind when one thinks of ideal parenting; in fact, the Breedloves are quite the opposite of ideal parents. Cholly is a severe alcoholic and Pauline is obsessed with the white family she works for and the white women she sees on cinema screens. Pauline takes Cholly’s drunkenness as her mission from God; as an upright, Christian woman, it is her duty to punish this man for his inadequacies (Morrison 42). The dysfunction present in their marriage results in brutal, knock-down-drag-out fights between the two: “he fought her the way a coward fights a man—with feet, the palms of his hands, and teeth. She, in turn, fought back in a purely feminine way—with frying pans and poker, and occasionally a flatiron would sail towards his head” (43). While Pecola’s brother, Sammy, is

able to leave because he is not “restricted by youth and sex,” Pecola must endure the pain of hearing her parents fight like animals (43). Reading through this passage, readers can see how vastly different Pecola’s life is from the image as depicted by the family utopia myth as perpetrated by Dick and Jane.

When narratives such as Dick and Jane are placed in schools, an educational space becomes a place where existing class structures are reproduced and dominant ideologies are reinforced (Werrlein 56). Ideologies surrounding ideals of whiteness, the acceptable family structure, and the importance of capitalism—primed black subjects, as Morrison illustrates in the novel, to automatically compare themselves to the ideal depicted by Dick and Jane. She also does the same to readers—by constantly confronting readers with the myth that is Dick and Jane, she sets them up to compare their own lives with that of the myth. When Dick and Jane primers are read in schools, it creates a narrative for the children that does not include people of color (if they are present, then they are isolated). This is problematic because studies show “that the elementary school experience is central to the formation of political orientations” (Sallach 43). When alternative, controversial, or “deviant” perspectives are excluded, it gives students only one perspective and that perspective is often “white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon” (Sallach 43). The dominant class’ access to institution seeps even into an educational space—furthering their agenda and continually propagating certain ideals and notions on communities that are unable to fit the ideal.

Not only are the Breedlove’s African American, but they are also poor—another categorical identity that places stigmas on the identities of individuals. The spatial location of the Breedlove’s home furthers their seclusion from the rest of society because it is a visual identifier of their lifestyle that directly opposes the hegemonic norm and dominant cultural narratives.

Pecola Breedlove and her family live in an abandoned storefront at the corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio. This is drastically different from the white and green house as depicted by the Dick and Jane readers presented at the beginning of the novel. Not only is it abandoned, but it is an eyesore to the community and those outside of it as well: “Visitors who drive to this tiny town wonder why it has not been torn down, while pedestrians, who are residents of the neighborhood, simply look away when they pass it” (Morrison 33). Those outside of the community wonder why it looks the way it does and those who reside in the town simply look away. This is not only outsiders but also residents turning their backs to what is happening to the Breedlove family and what factors landed them in such a position.

The events that landed the Breedlove’s in an abandoned storefront are not ones that happened by circumstance and not “because they were having temporary difficulty adjusting to the cutbacks at the plant” (Morrison 38). Fluctuation in employment was not the reason for their less-than-ideal living situation. It was “because they were poor and black, and they stayed there because they believed they were ugly. Although their poverty was traditional and stultifying, it was not unique” (Morrison 38). The poverty of African Americans was not uncommon by any means.

Like Claudia, the narrator says, the poverty of the Breedlove’s is not one that is unusual in African American communities. The MacTeer family is not of a much higher class than that of the Breedlove’s. The house that the MacTeer’s reside in “is old, cold, and green. At night a kerosene lamp lights one large room. The others are braced in darkness, peopled by roaches and mice” (Morrison 10). The house that the MacTeer’s reside in looks very much like that of the Breedlove’s, so why is it that Claudia and Frieda are not as affected by hegemonic norms and narratives as Pecola proves to be.

Readers realize that the MacTeer family is not more functional because they are more financially well off, but because the household and community that supports their development—although it may be harsh. In a moment of sickness, Claudia throws up in her bed resulting in a lecture from her mother—“What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don’t you have sense enough to hold your head out the bed? Now look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke” (Morrison 11). While it can be read that Mrs. MacTeer was being neglectful, I read this episode as Mrs. MacTeer showing her girls some tough love. Since the MacTeer’s are not of the social class that warrants multiple washings of linens and clothing, they must be conservative of their scarce resources so that they stretch the furthest they can.

The Macteer’s household is one that is strained by financial matters. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer are young girls who are also responsible for contributing to the household—“When we catch colds, they shake their heads in disgust at our lack of consideration. How, they ask us, do you expect anybody to get anything done if you all are sick?” (10). It seems cruel to ask two small girls to contribute to the income of their household, but during the 1940’s, children who worked for the betterment of their family was not all that uncommon. This act gives the girls some sense of independence and responsibility that they would not find anywhere else. Claudia gets sick after working with coal and gets scolded by her mother for not taking better care of herself and wearing something on her head (10). Claudia then throws up in her bed and is met with her mother’s cries of “What did you puke on the bed clothes for? Don’t you have sense enough to hold your head out of the bed? Now, look what you did. You think I got time for nothing but washing up your puke” (11). This does not seem like the ideal response from a mother, but it is a sort of tough love that comes with not having the means to easily provide the

comforts of life. Since the MacTeer's maintain their own house, sickness causes a certain kind of inconvenience that their time budgets do not allow for.

Although the MacTeer's are not wealthy by any means, they do possess a means that are not afforded to many. When Pecola drinks three quarts of milk just to get a look at the beautiful Shirley Temple on the cup, Mrs. MacTeer says "...I don't know what I'm suppose to be running here, a charity ward I guess. Time for me to get out of the *giving* line and get in the *getting* line. I guess I ain't supposed to have nothing. I'm supposed to end up in the poorhouse. Look like nothing I do is going to keep me out of there" (24). Unlike many families, the MacTeer's are able to take in another little girl and keep her up—this is indicative of some of the financial flexibility that the MacTeer's possess.

However, this flexibility is not without a source; Mr. Henry, a boarder in the home of the MacTeer's contributes to the income of the family. Since he is paying to live there, Mr. Henry becomes a part of the everyday life of the family and he eventually preys on Frieda MacTeer. Frieda tells Claudia about what happened and how he "*picked*" at her by touching her tiny breasts. When Mr. and Mrs. MacTeer learn of this, they take a defensive approach: Mr. MacTeer throws a tricycle at his head; Mrs. MacTeer hits him with a broom; and Mr. Buford, the neighbor, tries to shoot him (100). The adults surrounding Frieda come to her rescue at the first mention of someone being inappropriate towards her. There is no question of whether or not it happened; they simply make sure that Mr. Henry never comes back.

While the community surrounding Frieda takes care of her when she is abused, Pecola has no such community. Cholly Breedlove sees his daughter in the kitchen, scratching her foot—a gesture that reminds him of when he first saw his wife, Pauline. He finds himself wanting to help Pecola—a child who he sees as broken and burdened by life inappropriately. He finds

himself aroused by the image of his broken daughter and sexually attacks her as a result of his own brokenness. When Cholly is finished, Pecola passes out and he covers her but does not put her panties back on—leaving her exposed and vulnerable to her mother, who readers later learn, beats her (163, 189). Pauline Breedlove does not nurture her daughter after this devastating event, but instead acts out of jealousy and beats her. Even Pecola's own mother does not protect her against this travesty inflicted upon her.

Much of Pauline Breedlove's resentment towards her daughter after this event is due to her own insecurities that are a result of the same indoctrination into cultural narratives and ideals that Pecola faces. Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove is not an exemplary model of what it means to love oneself when the rest of the world will not. When Cholly and Pauline move up North, she has high hopes for their new life; however, she finds herself isolated in her new community. Her inability to fit in with the new women she is around leads to a desire to try even harder to make herself fit into this mold. She would wear high-heeled shoes, but they "aggravated her shuffle into a pronounced limp" (117-118). The black women that Pauline encountered "were amused by her because she did not straighten her hair. When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly" (118). Even when Pauline attempts to fit this ideal, she is unable to because the women still laugh at her efforts.

Pauline's lack of peer relations naturally leads to her desire for clothes that are in fashion and in the style of the women she idolizes, but she does not possess the financial means to do so. Cholly Breedlove goads her about wanting this money for such vain purchases, so she finds work of her own. This causes a divide between Mr. and Mrs. Breedlove because neither can agree on where the money should go. Because of their indecision, financial things become "the focus of all their discussions, hers for clothes his for drink" (118). Although Pauline finds herself

attracted to the material wealth of these women, she is unable to attain them without getting herself a job. After she does, she realizes that it is not because of her own desire that she wants these things, but because she “merely wanted other women to cast favorable glances her way” (118). This pursuit of financial independence is not so that she can live a comfortable life, but so that Pauline Breedlove can keep up appearances and model herself after the women she idolized.

Not only does Pauline find herself wanting next to the women in her community, but also next to the women in the cinemas. When Pauline tells Cholly that she is pregnant, they find themselves regressing back into their earlier days of marriage where the fighting is less frequent and Cholly asks if she is okay. Pauline quits her job working for a white family and goes back to her old housekeeping tasks, finding herself bored and lonely in her two-room abode. To combat this loneliness, she goes to the movies and sees her ideal life projected in front of her:

Along with the idea of romantic love, she was introduced to another—physical beauty. Probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought. Both 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. She forgot lust and simple caring for. She regarded love as possessive mating, and romance as the goal of the spirit. It would be for her a well-spring from which she would draw the most destructive emotions, deceiving the lover and seeking to imprison the beloved, curtailing freedom in every way (122).

It is in the movies that Pauline finds herself entrenched in ideals of beauty—something she associates with inner virtue. Because of her encounters, “she was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it to some category in the scale of absolute beauty,

and the sale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (122). In these movies, Pauline sees men taking good care of their women, clean houses beautifully decorated, and bathrooms with toilets in the same room as the bathtub (123). These images portrayed in the movies makes coming home hard for Pauline because her life does not line up with the ideal.

Scholar Malin LaVon Walther claims that by portraying movies as the primary means through which Pauline has absorbed idyllic images of beauty, Morrison presents the artifice of Pauline’s internalized ideals (777). The silver screen becomes the scale through which Pauline judges people’s outward beauty—an indicator of their inner virtue. Since she is obsessed with these images, Pauline ignores the reality of her own body: *“I was sitting back in my seat, and I taken a big bite of that candy and it pulled a tooth right out of my mouth. I could have cried. I had good teeth, not a rotten one in my head. [...] There I was, give months pregnant, trying to look like Jean Harlow, and a front tooth gone”* (123). Pauline has taken these images on herself and has no way of meeting them: she is poor, black, and pregnant. There is no way that she can be Jean Harlow no matter how she styles her hair (Walther 778). The same can be said of her daughter—as long as she does not have blue eyes, she cannot be “un-othered.”

This indoctrination that Pauline goes through is very similar to the one that her daughter, Pecola, goes through as well. One of the central characters that aid Pecola in her demise is Shirley Temple. To look like Shirley Temple, in the eyes of little Pecola Breedlove, was to be loved, beautiful, and powerful. Frieda brings Pecola a plate of graham crackers and milk in a Shirley Temple cup while her sister, Claudia says, *“She [Pecola] was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s face”* (19). Already, Pecola is fascinated by the mere hint of Shirley Temple’s beauty. Because of Pecola’s deep admiration for Shirley Temple, she drinks three quarts of milk at the MacTeers’ house, resulting in a stern scolding

from Mrs. MacTeer. Claudia says, “We know she was fond of the Shirley Temple cup and took every opportunity to drink milk out of it just to handle and see sweet Shirley’s face. My mother knew that Frieda and I hated milk and assumed Pecola drank it out of greediness” (23). Because Claudia and Frieda spend so much time with Pecola, they are able to see that she drinks the milk just to gaze at the beauty of Shirley Temple and not to be self-indulgent. Here, Pecola is sating herself with white milk out of a Shirley Temple cup—leading readers to see this as Pecola ingesting ideals of whiteness by the means of media portrayals of what it means to be beautiful.

In times of distress, Pecola finds comfort in imagining her life in the center and not at the margins. The tight quarters of the Breedloves make it hard for Pecola to escape the arguments, so when her parents fight, Pecola cowers under her quilt, makes herself small, and tries to make herself disappear. She squeezes her eyes shut and waits for little parts of her body to fade away, one by one. However, “try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear. So what was the point? They were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces” (45). It is with her eyes that Pecola is able to completely absorb these images of whiteness. Without her eyes, she would not be bombarded with the images of little girls like the character of Shirley Temple—absorbing the ideals that they represent. Everything, for Pecola, is in the eyes—the means by which she observes and adopts these ideals and the key to her liberation.

Because Pecola is so entrenched in these images of whiteness, she cannot help but compare herself to them. Pecola is always isolated to the peripheral until someone wants to make fun of her. She decides “if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights—if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different” (46). She places her ugliness solely in her eyes: “Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not

big and flat like some of those who were thought so cute” (46). If her eyes were different, she believes that her parents would stop fighting: “Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (46). She puts emphasis on the color of her eyes and places them as the reason why her parents fight. Her association with beauty and idealism is troublesome because it makes Pecola believe that her eyes are the only reason for her isolation and not the society that produced such ideals.

Pecola’s own eyes and the eyes of others becomes a central symbol throughout the novel and her encounter with store owner, Mr. Yacobowski’s, eyes plays a crucial role in the breaking of the young girl: “Blue eyes. Blear-dropped. Slowly, like Indian summer moving imperceptibly toward fall, he looks towards her. Somewhere between retina and object, between vision and view, his eyes draw back, hesitate, and hover. At some fixed point in time and space he senses that he need not waste the effort of a glance” (48). Without even really looking, Mr. Yacobowski already deems Pecola’s presence as not being worthy of a glance: “He does not see her, because for him there is nothing to see. How can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant storekeeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth, his mind honed on the doe-eyed Virgin Mary, his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, *see* a little black girl?” (49). As an immigrant storekeeper, his existence never necessitated that he “see” a little black girl when his mind is trained to accommodate images of the Virgin Mary. Pecola sees Mr. Yacobowski struggle to make himself look at her and:

She does not know what keeps his glance suspended. Perhaps because he is grown, or a man, and she a little girl. But she has seen interest, disgust, even anger in grown male eyes. “Yet this vacuum is not new to her. It has an edge; somewhere in the bottom lid is the distaste. She has seen it lurking in the eyes of

all white people. So. The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes (48-49).

In his eyes, Pecola finds distaste as opposed to the usual anger and disgust that she finds in the eyes of grown males. She immediately attributes this look to her blackness.

Wrongfully so, she reads the storekeepers expression as a pure distaste for her blackness and then projects this onto the whole of society. She says that Mr. Yacobowski has lived a life that does not necessitate him acknowledging a little black girl's existence; if so, why was his gaze suspended on her? Being a white man, his cultural make up does not demand that he acknowledge people outside of his own social and racial caste. She believes that this look that is tinged with distaste is a result of her blackness—something that she cannot change. The encounter is one with a hopeless tone, emphasizing just how apt Pecola is to read the distasteful looks of adults and children as something that is truthful rather than something that is subjective. Instead of thinking that the problem lies with them, she inherently believes that the problem lies with her and the color of her skin.

Unlike Pecola, however, Claudia MacTeer does not learn until later what it means to worship at the altar of whiteness and its perceived beauty. Unlike her sister and their new friend, Pecola, Claudia does not find herself enamored with Shirley Temple to any such degree. While Pecola and Frieda are having a conversation about how cute Shirley Temple is, Claudia says, "I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles, who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me" (19). Here, Claudia admits that her hatred for

Shirley Temple does not stem from her desires to look like her, but because of the time that she takes away from the communities that these men are a part of. Bojangles, to Claudia, is one of the few representations of African American people in cinema. She says instead of spending time with her, “he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels” (19). Claudia is bothered most by the time that Shirley Temple gets to spend with the men in Claudia’s life. When these men spend time with little girls who look like Shirley Temple, they are not able to spend time with little girls like Claudia. This jealousy that Claudia feels so strongly indicates to readers just how strong her desire is for family and community bonds.

Claudia’s desires for a strong family structure and a supportive community are further exemplified by her real wish for Christmas. Instead of the white baby dolls that she is given, Claudia wants to “feel something on Christmas day” (Morrison 21-22). She says, “Had any adult with the power to fulfill my desires taken me seriously and asked me what I wanted, they would have known that I did not want to have anything to own, or to possess any object” (Morrison 21). Instead she says, “I want to sit on the low stool in Big Mama’s kitchen with my lap full of lilacs and listen to Big Papa play his violin for me alone” (22). Her wishes are simply to be enveloped in a loving household with the people she loves most and not to be given hard, unyielding baby dolls.

The white baby dolls that Claudia is given are supposed to make her blissfully happy, but she says that they do just the opposite: “When I took it to bed, its hard unyielding limbs resisted my flesh—the tapered fingertips on those dimpled hands scratched. If, in my sleep, I turned, the bone-cold head collided with my own. It was a most uncomfortable, patently aggressive sleeping companion. To hold it was no more rewarding” (Morrison 20). Claudia does not understand what

it is that makes baby dolls so special or worthy of admiration. She finds only coldness and distance where others find comfort and fondness, resulting in her desire to dismember the baby dolls she is given—“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” (20). She wants to break apart the doll to see what it is that makes white baby dolls so much more beautiful and desirable than her. Instead of internalizing these ideals like Pecola, Claudia seems to take a destructive approach. She wants to understand why whiteness is the most desirable trait to have in terms of outward appearance. Ruth Rosenberg in her 1987 article “Seeds in Hard Ground: Black Girlhood in *The Bluest Eye*” says, “Claudia’s ability to survive intact and to consolidate an identity derives from her vigorous opposition to the colorist attitudes of her community” (Rosenberg 440). Rosenberg, here, is suggesting that it is Claudia’s inherent opposition shields her from taking cultural transmissions and internalizing them into something “insidious” (Rosenberg 440). Claudia’s hostility towards these baby dolls can be attributed also to her lack of understanding about what it is that makes them special and beautiful.

Kenneth Clark and his wife, Mamie, conducted an experiment in the 1940’s to assess the racial identification of African American children by using white dolls and brown dolls. In their experiment, they would ask which doll was the good one, which one was the bad one, which one they wanted to play with more, and which one looked most like them. The Clarks found that the majority of the children identified a brown doll as the one that looked most like them, but they chose to play with the white doll because it was the nice one with a nice color. As a result of their experiment, the Clarks deduced that the children had internalized the racist messages of society and were unable to self-love as a result of that (Bergner 299). Recently, the study has been seen as problematic, but it still begs the question of why African American children

automatically associate white dolls as being the “good” dolls. Why do they not choose a doll with a similar skin color as them to be the “good” doll?

Claudia MacTeer faces the same issue with her own baby dolls—finding them unyielding and hard—hard not only in their material, but hard to understand as well. What is it that makes them so much more beautiful than she is? Why is the world not bowing down at the feet of a little African American girl? Claudia’s incomprehension makes her unable to love the baby dolls as she is supposed to because of her want to “examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable” (21). She seems plagued as a child by these ideals that have no origin or reason behind them. To Claudia, these ideals are blindly followed and rigidly enforced because “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). Claudia, here, lets readers know the state of representation in major media outlets. Shopping stores, print media, and cinema are all enforcing these ideals about what it means to be beautiful by the images that they choose to represent. Choosing blonde-haired, blue-eyed, white girls as spokeswomen creates narratives that exclude African American women and girls from being considered beautiful by themselves and society.

Although Pauline is not able to fit into the visual ideals of beauty, she finds solace in becoming the breadwinner of her family after the birth of her daughter, Pecola. Pauline finds employment in the home of a white family and it is there that she finds many things that she feels she has been missing all of her life. This family gives something Pauline has wanted all of her life: a nickname. Affectionately called Polly, the white family that she works for becomes Pauline’s means of further absorbing white ideals. Situating herself in the home of a white family, Pauline “looked at their houses, smelled their linen, touched their silk draperies, and

loved all of it” (127). Pauline becomes the ideal servant because it fulfills her needs to be a part of the white, middle class family life that is so full of beauty and virtuosity. Her focus on the well being of the family she works for leads Pauline to neglect her own children and her husband because the reality is never enough for Pauline. The Breedlove family is not able to afford beautiful luxuries, soft linens, or commodities that will satisfy Pauline’s visual appetite; therefore they come behind the white family that Pauline reveres so highly.

Pauline Breedlove is not represented visually by the visual and consumer culture of America, so she is encumbered with unattainable ideals that she enforces on her own family. She secludes the beauty of her employers from her family and never introduces it into their storefront. The Fisher’s are able to fulfill in Pauline a desire to belong to some group—a need she does not have met by her own community (Kuenz 425). Pauline, in fact, “taught them [her children] fear: fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God, fear of madness like Cholly’s mother’s. Into her song she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (128). Despite the beauty that Pauline sees in Pecola’s head full of pretty hair, she is still an ugly baby in her eyes. Growing up with this ideal leads Pecola to see herself as nothing other than ugly because she has nothing to combat these dangerous notions. This same feeling of self-image is present in all of the Breedlove’s—not just the women.

The self-image that the Breedlove’s hold for themselves is one that tangibly comes off of them. Each family member deals with their inherited ugliness in their own way: “Cholly, whose ugliness [...] was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak” (38). What is this ugliness? Is it purely physical or is it more than just outward appearance? This ugliness can be read as the

family's unquestionable acceptance of ideals that are not theirs to live up to. The Breedlove's all were endowed with their ugliness: "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).

There seems to be no reason as to why the Breedlove's found themselves to be inherently ugly; however they saw nothing to combat those notions of ugliness: "saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance" (Morrison 39). There was nothing to the visible eye that could suggest to the Breedlove's that they were anything other than ugly. Pecola's deep admiration of Shirley Temple is one example of the media representations that the Breedlove's encounter while moving throughout the world. These images of middle-class white life are so incongruent to the reality of the Breedlove's that they become detrimental to the emotional well being of the family. Instead of looking at the images and living their lives in spite of them, the Breedlove's internalize these images and use them as a means to compare themselves to what they are "supposed" to be.

While Claudia critically examines the representation of African Americans, Pecola does the opposite and adopts the ideals that are promoted without thinking twice about them. The differences between Claudia and Pecola, as Ruth Rosenberg suggests, seems to lie in something inherent in Claudia that is not present in Pecola. However, I posit that the communities that the two girls come from are responsible for the differences in attitudes between the two girls. While Claudia is raised in an environment that allows her to critically evaluate ideals of beauty in her own adolescent way, Pecola is raised in an insidious environment that somewhat forces her to digest these transmitted ideals. Resilience is not always an inherent behavior, and it is an attribute that needs to be nurtured and fostered. Because of her higher social class and place in a community, Claudia is able to more critically examine ideals of beauty than Pecola is. For Pecola

to develop some sense of resilience, she would need to be a part of some larger community that teaches her such traits. Instead, she is left with her dysfunctional, argumentative parents who are already so broken themselves. Both “black and white communities unwittingly join forces to extinguish Pecola Breedlove’s fledgling sense of self-worth” emphasizing Pecola’s isolation from not only other communities, but from her own as well (Cormier-Hamilton 118). This isolation that Pecola feels is due, in part, to the reality of her family life.

Today, if Pecola Breedlove walked into a contemporary department store, she would look around at the crisp white displays and more than likely find someone who looks very much like herself and those around her. If readers put Pecola into modern times, they could see how she might not feel like such an island amongst all the advertisements; instead, she would hopefully see girls and women like herself. There are now numerous African American women who are gracing the pages, stages, and screens of every type of medium. Women such as Michelle Obama, Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice, Ursula Burns, and Gabby Douglas are examples of some of the outstanding examples of African American female leadership, success, talent, and drive. In the 1940’s, Pecola would not have seen an African American woman as a CEO of a Fortune 500 company (Ursula Burns), a young African American woman winning gold medals at the Olympics (Gabby Douglas), or an African American woman as the First Lady of the United States of America (Michelle Obama). Not only would Pecola find women that looked like her advertised and on movie screens, but Claudia would also find baby dolls on the shelves that look like her. Both of these girls would hopefully not feel as invisible in modern times as they do in the 1940’s in Lorain, Ohio.

Though it seems like Pecola’s madness would be without causation in 2015, harmful cultural narratives are still imposed upon women of color by major media outlets and other

mediums. The cultural narratives as written by politicians, legislation, media outlets, and other institutional systems continue to create narratives that are destructive to those within a certain racial, cultural, or socioeconomic group. The access to institutional power allows dominant classes to impose ideals upon communities without resources to fit the ideals. Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* brings those at the periphery to the center, giving readers the opportunity to see the power of such dominant ideals and consider the impact they have on people living at the margins.

Educator Jerome Bump is right in arguing that *The Bluest Eye* is a novel in which readers—across cultural, racial, and economic lines can converge and engage in critical, authentic dialogue. The holders of hegemonic discourse are able put themselves in the place of the other and identify with the struggles of many of the novel's characters. By incorporating such novels with visceral, poetic language into curricula, teachers can challenge students to think about how discourse and commodity-based advertising and promotion has a negative effect on those depicted and those excluded.

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