

A Mad Girl:
The Oppression of Beauty in *The Bluest Eye*

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“A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment” (Morrison 162). Pecola, a little black girl who thirsts for a pair of blue eyes, finally goes mad because of her never achieved wish. She can only live in her fantasy, persuading herself that she has a pair of beautiful blue eyes. She believes that only when she has a pair of blue eyes can she be loved. The blue eye symbolizes the characteristic of white people. In other words, Pecola wants to become a girl with blue eyes so that she can be accepted and loved by the surrounding people and society. Influenced by the mass culture which means the culture of white people, Pecola follows it blindly. Her distortive thought finally leads her to a tragedy.

In 1940s, the discrimination in America is obvious. The conflicts between white people and black people never come to an end. The white people, a part of the dominant culture, discriminate colored people. They are proud of their race, having advantage in the society and despising the people who are different from them. However, affected by the mass culture—the white culture, the black people follow the value of mass culture and lose their identity as a black people. “Interaction with mass culture for anyone not represent therein, and especially for African-Americans,

frequently requires abdication of self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another” (Kuenz 422). Therefore, they submit to the mass culture, failing to identify their own identity. They are changed by the power of the dominant culture. Their behaviors are totally opposite to the idea that W. E. B. Du Bois once advocate: “We are going to have a real and valuable and eternal judgment only as we make ourselves free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men” (Du Bois 987). W. E. B. Du Bois criticizes the black people who submit to authority and are not confident enough to be proud of being a black people. However, in *The Bluest Eye*, as a helpless child, Pecola fails to identify herself as a black girl under the pressure and hatred from her surrounding environment.

The surrounding environment described in the novel clearly shows the influence and popularity of white culture—from the advertisement of everyday products to the movie stars, the image of white beauty keeps emerging in the novel. For example, Shirley Temple cups, Mary Jane candies, white baby dolls and the popular actress Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. Pecola is fascinated by the image of white girl: “Frieda brought her (Pecola) for graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Tempo cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face” (Morrison 12). In Pecola’s thoughts, the image of the white girls with blue eyes is popular and is loved by every

one because people of that time, no matter white people or black people, always praise their beauty and gradually set a standard of beautiful girls. “All the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasure” (Morrison 14). And Pecola is totally attracted by the lovely image since she is bullied by people because her ugly appearance. In school, not only classmates but also teachers view Pecola as invisible person. She is not welcomed in school. Besides the isolation in school, she is also isolated in the society, even in her own family.

“Being a minority in both caste and class, we move about anyway on the hem of life” (Morrison 11). From the statement of Claudia, a narrator in the novel, it reveals the reality that the black people have to face. They are inferior to the white people. In American society, the color of the skin decides the class. Even the people having light color, the hybrids, are superior to the black people. However, compared with the other black people, Pecola’s family confronts a more miserable situation—they are not only despised by white people, but also marginalized in the black society. In other words, they are deserted by the whole world. In Pecola’s family, there is no warm and love. Her father Cholly and mother Pauline always fight with each other. The terrible relationship between her parents terrifies Pecola. She can not derive from her parents what she wants—love and care.

Pauline, as Pecola’s mother, increasingly ignores her children, her husband.

Instead, she works hard in a white people's family as a servant. She finds her ideal work which can satisfy her desire. Only to work in Mr. Fisher's beautiful and clean house does she achieve what she wants—beauty, order, cleanliness and praise. She is obsessed by the life of white people. "Her job with the Fishers provides her with the semblance of acceptance and community she cannot find or create in her own home and neighborhood" (Kuenz 425). Moreover, she considers that she is a part of the Fishers' family since she gets a nickname "Polly" from them. To Pauline, a new name means a new identity which she longs for. In the Fishers' family, she is not Pauline anymore. In the kitchen of Mr. Fisher's house, she can control everything. She can enjoy all the things that she likes and cannot do in her own house. As to her home, she chooses to ignore.

In the novel, it is clear that her fondness for the white people's lifestyle comes from her experience of watching movie. The Hollywood movies, which mean the prosperous of the mainstream of the culture—the culture of white in America, give Pauline a "re-education." "It (the movie) was really a simple pleasure, but she learned all there was to love and all there to hate" (Morrison 95). The movies not only make Pauline find what she admires but also establish a standard of physical beauty and virtue in her mind. That's why Pauline sees Pecola with hate after Pecola was born. "Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she

was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly” (Morrison 98). Because of the influence of the white culture, Pauline dislikes Pecola. Pecola is deserted by her mother. Pauline refused to share her sense of achievement with her family, let alone the love that Pecola has thirsted.

Facing the loneliness and ignorance, Pecola finds a way for her to get out of this kind of situation.—she prays to have a pair of blue eyes.

“It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her 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, . . . If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove (Pauline) too. Maybe they’d say, ‘Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.’” (Morrison 34)

Pecola, affected by the influence of the image of whiteness, finds a way which she thinks is reasonable to solve all the problems she faces—people would love her if she has blue eyes. Her parents won’t fight to each other. Her classmates and teachers won’t ignore her. People in the community won’t despise her because she has a pair of blue eyes, the eyes which is loved by everyone. She internalizes the standard of white beauty. “Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eye of other people” (Morrison 35). It’s a start of a tragedy. The Pecola’s craziness of blue eyes leads her to go mad since her wish would never come true.

Pecola’s experiences show the difficulties the black people face. The culture of

mass culture—the dominant culture increasingly invades the black people's lives. Living under the influence of white culture, the black people are forced to change or accept the value of dominant culture in order to gain identification from others; they have to give up the identity as a black people. This blind admiration of dominant culture can be viewed as oppression. In *The Bluest Eye*, both Pecola and Pauline are victims in the oppression of beauty standard. They are trapped by the standard of beauty, and finally have miserable outcome—the whole community erases the existence of Pecola's family. The strong power of dominant culture poses a threat to the minorities. The threat is so strong that it even ruins the purest mind in the society, the innocence like Pecola.

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