

Book Review of *The Bluest Eye* written by Toni Morrison

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INTRODUCTION

1. Background of Writing

The writer chooses *The Bluest Eye* because this novel is challenging to be reviewed. The controversial nature of the book, which deals with racism, incest, and child molestation, makes it being one of the most challenged books in America's libraries – the ones people complain about or ask to be removed, according to The American Library Association (<http://www.ew.com/article/2015/04/14/here-are-american-library-associations-10-most-complained-about-books-2014>). On the other hand, the story of *The Bluest Eye* is interesting because the story tells about an eleven year old African American girl who hates her own self due to her black skin. She prays for white skin and blue eyes because they will make her beautiful and allow her to see the world differently, the community will treat her better as well. The story is set in Lorain, Ohio, against the backdrop of America's Midwest during the years following the Great Depression. *The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison's first novel published in 1970.

2. Purposes of Writing

First of all, the purpose of the writing is that the writer would like to give the readers a portrait to stop hating themselves for everything they are not, and start loving themselves for everything that they are. The writer assesses that Toni Morrison' story line presented in the novel is eye-catching eventhough it experiences an abundance of controversy because of the novel's strong language

and sexually explicit content. The second purpose of the writing is the writer wants to expose the strengths and weaknesses *The Bluest Eye*, so the readers could get a reference of this novel.

3. Biography of Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison, also known as Chloe Anthony Wofford, is an American writer noted for her examination of black experience (especially black female experience) within the black community. She was born February 18, 1931, in Lorain, Ohio, United States. She received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Morrison grew up in the American Midwest in a family that possessed a love of and appreciation for black culture. Storytelling, songs, and folktales were a deeply formative part of her childhood.

Morrison's first book, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is a novel of initiation concerning a victimized adolescent black girl who is obsessed by white standards of beauty and longs to have blue eyes. In 1973 a second novel, *Sula*, was published; it examines (among other issues) the dynamics of friendship and the expectations for conformity within the community. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is told by a male narrator in search of his identity; its publication brought Morrison to national attention. *Tar Baby* (1981), set on a Caribbean island, explores conflicts of race, class, and sex. The critically acclaimed *Beloved* (1987), which won a Pulitzer Prize for fiction, is based on the true story of a runaway slave who, at the point of recapture, kills her infant daughter in order to spare her a life of slavery. *Jazz* (1992) is a story of violence and passion set in New York City's Harlem during the 1920s. Subsequent novels are *Paradise* (1998), a richly detailed portrait of a black utopian community in Oklahoma, and *Love* (2003), an intricate family story that reveals the myriad facets of love and its ostensible opposite. *A Mercy* (2008) deals with slavery in 17th-century America. In the redemptive *Home* (2012), a traumatized Korean War veteran encounters racism after returning home and later overcomes apathy to rescue his sister.

The central theme of Morrison's novels is the black American experience. In an unfair society her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural

identity. Her use of fantasy, her poetic style, and her creative writing style gave her stories great strength and texture.

Biography of Toni Morrison is taken from:

<http://www.biography.com/people/toni-morrison-9415590> - *accessed on March 25th, 2015 11:16*

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SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The Bluest Eye is the story of a young African American girl and her family who are affected in every direction by the dominant American culture. It tells the story of an African American girl named Pecola, an eleven year old who is basically described as poor, black, and ugly. Pecola idolizes the idea of having white skin and blue eyes that she believes are the ultimate representation of the “ideal” of beauty.

Pecola has experienced sad moments in her life, her mom, Mrs. Breedlove is neglectful. She does not care about her at all and chooses to work and take care of the baby in white family. While Cholly Breedlove, her own father, is an abusive alcoholic who rapes Pecola until she gets pregnant. Her parents fight on a regular basis, and these altercations lead to physical violence. This is why Pecola's brother, Samuel, copes with the violence by running away. The reader learns that Pecola's parents have both had tragic lives too, which has led to their dysfunction as adults. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, was abandoned as a baby and later turned away by his father after searching him out. During Cholly's first sexual experience, two white men force him and the girl he was with to continue the sexual act as they watch. Her mother, Mrs. Breedlove, has a lame foot and has always felt isolated and ugly. As a young woman, she loses herself in movies. The beautiful white actresses make her believe that she is ugly. Thus in an act of desperation, Pecola visits Soaphead Church who claims he can work miracles, and Pecola asks for blue eyes. Soaphead Church tricks Pecola into poisoning a dog he has long wanted to kill, stating that if the dog acts funny it is a sign she will receive her wish.

REVIEW OF THE NOVEL

After reading *The Bluest Eye*, the writer realizes that there are some interesting points of the strengths and the weaknesses that exist in this novel. So, in this occasion, the writer will explain about the strengths and the weaknesses of this novel.

1. The Strengths of *The Bluest Eye*

The first strength of this novel is that the author, Toni Morrison, criticizes the white beauty which is the main theme of the novel. Whereas, beauty is something that is relative, it means that there are differences in the view of some people about the beauty. Knight Dunlap through Alfred Strom states that “Beauty varies distinctly from race to race, so that such concepts can not be accurately compares across racial lines, though he acknowledges that darker races sometimes change their standards when influenced by Whites, and some even come to desire White mates – a phenomenon with which we are all too familiar in our century” (*American Dissident Voices* Broadcast of October 2, 2004). Nevertheless, black people sometimes change their standards when confronted with the white race. In fact, standards of white beauty cause distress for black women. When a woman can not meet the applicable standards of beauty in society, she feels a sense of insecurity, loneliness, and low self-esteem. This is what happened to Pecola, the main character in the novel who, feels like the ugliest person alive due to not having the white beauty standard.

“It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that 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. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those

who were thought so cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, "Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes." (Morrison, 1970: 46)

The quotations above indicates that Pecola blames that her ugliness making herself rejected by the society, including her own family. She is certain that without blue eyes and white skin, she will never be seen as beautiful, and therefore, cannot ever see her own life as beautiful. In addition, if she meets the white beauty standard, people around will treat her better. This mindset puts Pecola in a big question, why she is different from others: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school, by teachers and classmates alike" (Morrison, 1970: 45).

Through Pecola, Morrison exposes the power and cruelty of middle-class American definition of beauty, which makes Pecola driven madness by her consuming obsession for white skin, blonde hair and not just blue eyes, but the bluest ones. The pressures of society and her own self-hatred lead Pecola into a state of madness. Pecola is such a victim of popular white culture and its pervasive advertising, where she believes that people would value her more if she were not black: "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. "Here," they said, "This is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it." (Morrison, 1970: 21)

The Bluest Eye shows that whiteness is desired by everyone. The society blindly accepts that the true beauty means having blue eyes, blonde hair, and white skin. It makes heartache for all the non-blue eyed and brown or black skinned children who never got to see their beauty reflected in the eyes of those around them. Through what happened to Pecola, the author wants to speak up that beauty is not simply something to behold; it is something one can do.

The second strength of this novel is the point of view of *The Bluest Eye*. Point of view refers to the narrator's position in relation to a story being told. "To understand imaginative narrative we must consider the author's point of

view or angle of narration as well as the content of his work. Point of view or angle is not the author's general attitude toward life or toward his story, but is a specific concept that we must understand clearly" (Potter, 1967: 28). The point of view used in this novel makes the readers feel not boring to read the novel. Morrison is famous for her use of fragmented narrative with multiple perspectives. In this novel, she uses Claudia as a narrator in *The Bluest Eye* that narrates the story for two reasons; to provide a child's perspective as well as an adult's perspective. Unlike Pecola, Claudia has strong feelings of high self-esteem and worth. Claudia is proud of being black and has learned her values from her supportive family environment. It is because there is love in Claudia's house, but it is absent in Pecola's.

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. Instead he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little white girls whose socks never slid down under their heels (Morrison, 1970: 19).

The quotation above conveys the thoughts and perceptions of a 9-year-old Claudia which is giving the novel an aspect of innocence. Different from Pecola and friends who idolize Shirley Temple (a hugely popular child actress of the day), Claudia hates her. Claudia's rejection of white beauty is expressed in her self-confessed hatred of Shirley Temple. As time goes by, in this novel little Claudia grows up into an adult one, which her point of view is different with when she was a child.

The birdlike gestures are worn away to a mere picking and plucking her way between the tire rims and the sunflowers, between Coke bottles and milkweed, among all the waste and beauty of the world—which is what she herself was. All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us (Morrison, 1970: 38).

The quotation from the last chapter of the novel sums up grown-up Claudia's impressions of Pecola's madness. Pecola is beautiful because she is

human, but this beauty is invisible to the members of the community who have identified beauty with whiteness. It is also ironic since Pecola gives others beauty because their assumptions about her ugliness make them feel beautiful in comparison.

The third strength of the novel is about the introduction of the novel. Author Morrison brilliantly uses a series of United States's children book for teaching elementary students how to read entitled *Dick and Jane* to be placed in the opening of the novel. *Dick and Jane* is representation of idealized white middle class life. The pretty house, happy white mother and father, the blonde and blue-eyed siblings, the dog, cat, and picket fence. It is a sharp contrast to Pecola's life in the novel, thus the *Dick and Jane* narrative makes the story more heart-touching.

The *Dick and Jane* story appears three times in succession. The first text appears with full punctuation and normal spacing, so the readers can read the text clearly.

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play (Morrison, 1970:3).

Opening the story with the *Dick and Jane* narrative provides the reader with a representation of the ideal home, family, race, and standard of beauty. It is written properly showing the ideal of white family with a lot of love and happiness. The normal paragraph written makes the meaning clear, concise and coherent. While the second text appears without any punctuation or capitalization, but with a space between each of the words.

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane see the cat it goes meow-meow come and play come play with jane the kitten will not play see mother mother is very nice mother will you play with jane mother laughs laugh mother laugh see father he is big and strong father will you play with jane father is smiling smile father smile see the dog bowwow goes the dog do you want to play do you want to play with jane see the dog run run dog run look look here comes a friend the friend will play with jane they will play a good game play jane play (Morrison, 1970:4).

Eventhough the text is written in resolutely cheerful language, but it is disturbing since we can not find the punctuation. This time, the typography loses all punctuation, which is a visual metaphor for Pecola's losing her perspective about her worth as a person. It can be implied that the breakdown of the paragraph structure reflects the breakdown of Pecola as a black girl that believes she is nothing if she does not have blue eyes as she wishes.

Then the third text has no capitalization, no punctuation, and no spaces between the words.

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappys eejanesheshasareddressshewantstoplaywhowillplaywithjaneseethecatitgoes meowmeowcomeandplaycomeplaywithjanethekittenwillnotplayseemother motherisverynicemotherwillyouplaywithjanemotherlaughslaughmotherlauhghseefatherheisbigandstrongfatherwillyouplaywithjanefatherissmilingsmil efathersmileseethedogbowwowgoesthedogdoyouwanttoplaydoyouwanttop laywithjaneseethedogrunrundogrunlooklookherecomesafriendthefriendwill playwithjanetheywillplayagoodgameplayjaneplay (Morrison, 1970:4).

In the third repetition, when all the words run together, the speed and closeness of the connection between the elements of the story make it nearly unreadable. The same paragraph, repeated once more, having absolutely no meaning, is visual evidence of Pecola's consuming madness. A madness that is caused by her seeking to be beautiful and loved, to have blue eyes, and to experience the happiness and love that is illustrated in the *Dick and Jane* white family.

We can see the three same story of *Dick and Jane* but different forms above. Each repetition is less readable than the previous one, where the second and third version of the story take away the punctuation and then the spacing. At first we can read the story clearly but then it becomes blurry without any punctuation or space. In terms of Pecola's life, we can say that Pecola's dream is so far removed from reality that it becomes nonsense.

2. The Weaknesses of *The Bluest Eye*

Besides the strengths, the writer also finds some weaknesses from this novel. First, the language that is used in the novel is African-American slang terms. Actually, black vernacular speech gives the reader a sense of how recently these events are, on the other hand, it is hard to be understood by the readers. Not everyone understands the black slang terms, therefore some words in the novel confuse the readers: "When she tried to make up her face as they did, it came off rather badly. Their goading glances and private snickers at her way of talking (saying "chil'ren") and dressing developed in her a desire for new clothes" (Morrison, 1970: 118). There are some words written "chil'ren" in this novel, and this sentence is one of the examples. While reading that sentence, maybe most of the readers question the word "chil'ren" as it is not a common one. It can be seen that the phrase "chil'ren" is not clear for the readers who do not know the meaning of the word. "Chil'ren" here stands for children, but Morrison writes it that way as "chill" is a slang word that means cool, great, or awesome. For many people, this is an unusual word, however, for others, in particular younger African-American, this is a casual word that is very common to use. Toni Morrison uses her spoken African-American language in writing *The Bluest Eye* to show the emotion of the characters in the novel which are lower class, but sadly it is not easy for the readers to catch the meaning.

The second weakness of this novel is that Toni Morrison's criticism through the novel *The Bluest Eye* can give misunderstanding for the readers who are not critical. Criticism in the novel is the strength of the novel, but it can

become otherwise if the readers do not really understand what Toni Morrison is going to say in this novel.

Then the screen would light up, and I'd move right on in them pictures. White men taking such good care of they women, and they all dressed up in big clean houses with bathtubs right in the same room with the toilet. Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard (Morrison, 1970:123).

In the quotation above actually Toni Morrison satirizes about the white beauty. It makes black women envy with the life of white women that are treated well by white men. In particular, they envy the monetary security, comfort, and romance they find in white women. However, for those who are not critical, it can be an invitation to be a white beauty that will make them craving for a blue eyes, blonde hair, white skin, symbolizing the white concept of beauty, so that people will treat them very well.

CONCLUSION

The beauty of a woman is not in a facial mode, but the true beauty in a woman is reflected in her soul. No matter what color your eyes, hair, or skin, are you will always look beautiful if you are nice to people. It is not always physical beauty that makes a person beautiful, it is the heart that matters the most. Whatever your race is, accept and love yourself, because loving yourself is the greatest revolution.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison presents an interesting way but it is attractive. The writing style of Morrison becomes one of the strengths of the novel. Her use of different point of view makes the readers not feel bored to read the whole novel. In addition, the way Morrison puts the *Dick and Jane* in the opening of the novel story, which is extremely in contrast with Pecola's life, makes the readers feel the pain of Pecola in the novel. However, there are some weaknesses found in the novel. First, the language that is used by Toni Morrison in the novel is black slang terms so it is hard to be understood by the readers. Second, Toni Morrison's criticism through the novel *The Bluest Eye* can cause misunderstanding for the readers who are not critical. It can be an invitation to be a white beauty that will make them imitate the white beauty concept which means having blue eyes, white skin, and blonde hair.

Finally, with many strengths and weaknesses, *The Bluest Eye* is a recommended novel especially for those who like shades of racism or colonialism of beauty standards. Toni Morrison successfully makes the readers feel the pain felt by main character. The story gives us message to accept and love ourselves, as no one is going to love you if you do not love yourselves first.

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