Anahis Lorenzo

Professor Von Uhl & Professor Yankwitt

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Critical Research Analysis Essay

White is Beautiful

Toni Morrison’s novel, The Bluest Eye, takes place in the 1940s where colorism and societal values of physical attributes are of vigilant matters during this time period. Colorism is seen within the black community, Morrison conveys this through specific scenes in the book. Characters such as Maureen, Junior, and Pecola self-identify with their skin color expressing the distinction between privileged and marginalized. Sigmund Freud is the founder of psychoanalysis, in his lectures “The Five Lectures of Psycho-Analysis”, he mentions two concepts in his third lecture that is seen in Morrison’s novel. Toni Morrison presents her critique of society in The Bluest Eye, Pecola, Claudia, Junior, and Maureen encounter several afflictions through pernicious influences revolving their surroundings. Morrison scrutinizes beauty, class, and colorism through Freud’s concept of displacement and condensation.

Claudia the narrator of the novel, is presented with a gift for Christmas, she seems to not be so fond of it. In Freud’s third lecture, he defines condensation as a variety of ideas compressed into one symbol (Freud 2223). “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 treasure” (Morrison 20). To Claudia, her mother had assumed that she had wanted a doll with white characteristics. It was something more than just assuming, the fact that her mother did not ask Claudia what she had wanted, made her furious. Once Claudia took the doll, she began to touch the doll, as if questioning its beauty. In the novel it states,

“I fingered the face, wondering at the single-stroke eyebrows: picked at the pearly teeth stuck like two piano keys between red bowline lips… I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. Break off the tiny fingers, bend the flat feet, loosen the hair, twist the head around, and the thing made one sound” (Morrison 21).

Claudia disbelieves in societal standards of what beauty is and how it should be considered to be. Unlike Pecola and Frieda who seem to be obsessed with Sherley temples. Claudia receives a doll, which symbolizes a desire for beauty. Society puts the image of what beauty should look like through the doll, an object. In the 1940s, psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark created multiple experiments on the importance of the ‘Doll Test’. According to Gwen Bergner, an associate English professor at West Virginia University, states, “A majority of children identified a brown doll as looking like them, but chose a white doll to play with, as the nice one, and as the one with a nice color. The Clarks concluded that the children had internalized society's racist messages and thus suffered from wounded self-esteem” (Bergner 299). The experiment examined the effects of inculcated values on African American kids. The majority of children choose the white doll and spoke highly about it. Which affected the African American children's self-esteem by them beginning to think less of themselves.

Pecola at some point contemplates her parent’s “love”. This social stigma for skin color became of high value to her. According to Freud, displacement is “the process of distortion which transforms the repressed complexes into symptoms where there is unsuccessful repression” (Freud 2223). What Freud means by this is that the repressed emotion you once had, is now being reflected on to someone or something, in this case, Pecola seeing herself with blue eyes. “If those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different … her nose was not big and flat … if she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too” (Morrison 46). For Pecola’s parents to love her, she believes she must have the characteristics of a white person. Pecola assumes that if she were to be white or have blue eyes then her mother would love her even more because her mother loves to work with white people. Pecola goes from wanting to have blue eyes to fulfill a wish to have her mother’s affirmation to then seeing herself with blue eyes and fulfilling a new wish, which is being beautiful and having the bluest eyes. “Oh, yes. My blue eyes. Let me look again. See how pretty they are” (Morrison 201). To Pecola having blue eyes, means that she will be accepted by society. She will meet the societal norm of what beauty is. She displaces the thoughts of society’s criticism and society’s definition of beauty through blue eyes. Susmita Roye, the author of “Toni Morrison’s disrupted girls and their disturbed childhood”, is also an associate English professor. According to Roye, “Maya Angelou too speaks of how ardently she dreamt of emerging one fine day from her false ugly self to the true radiant beauty with blue eyes and blond locks she really was and then she would look like ‘the sweet little white girls who were everybody's dream of what was right in the world.’ ” (Roye 215). Maya Angelou was an African American poet, she also was in the same situation as Pecola, where she felt that to meet society’s standard of beauty she had to be white and have blue eyes. White girls were seen as innocent, pure and respected because of their looks. Both Maya Angelou and Pecola felt like to be beautiful, respected and valued, they had to be white.

Maureen Peal symbolizes wealth and beauty. Morrison states, “... A new girl in school named Maureen Peal. A high-yellow dream child with long brown hair … she was rich … The quality of her clothes threatened to deranged Frieda and me. She enchanted the entire school” (Morrison 62). Maureen thinks she is the prettiest because she is light skin. She makes it obvious to the nonwhites and nonlight skin that they will never be accepted by society if they are still black and poor. Maureen is seen as beautiful because of her features and is respected by everyone except by Frieda and Claudia. Maureen says to Frieda, “I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I am cute!” (Morrison 73). Aside from the standard that was set up by society, Maureen points it out towards Frieda, Claudia, and Pecola. Maureen calling Frieda ugly and black is like telling Pecola and all of the other black people in her community that they are ugly. This is why Maureen is seen as an important character in the novel because Pecola gets too attached to her, this drew her to want to become more like her but with blue eyes.

Being black was seen as something horrendous and unclassy. Geraldine makes sure that Junior understands that. Morrison states, “White kids; his mother did not like him to play with niggers. She had explained to him the difference between colored people and niggers… Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group” (Morrison 87). Junior’s mother, Geraldine, sets tiers for her son, the lighter you are on the spectrum, the more respected and valued you are in society. The darker you are, the more insignificant you become. Junior’s actions of trying to gain his mother’s love and attention led to him blaming the death of his mother’s cat on to Pecola. “ ‘Get out,’ she said, her voice quiet. ‘You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house’ ” (Morrison 92). Geraldine did not want Junior to hang out with kids who were not of the same shade as him. This goes hand in hand with Pecola because Pecola is of a darker shade than Junior. Junior blames the death of his mother’s cat on to Pecola because he knows that his mother does not respect, and does not see the value of them. The concept of color is condensation, depending on the color of people's skin, they are seen as wealthy and beautiful. Geraldine points that out to Junior when she tells him not to hang out with black people because they are not wealthy and clean. To Geraldine, being clean is having wealth and class and being beautiful.

Toni Morrison’s novel, The Bluest Eye, introduces her critique of society by using Pecola, Maureen, Junior and Claudia as characters to represent a community belittling African American girls. The novel is seen through a Freudian lens with the concepts of displacement and condensation. This novel is written in the 40s, where African American girls would choose to look like a white girl. During this time, the ‘doll test’ was happening, little black girls would choose the white doll because they say it as marvelous. This standard of beauty put on by society from the twentieth century could still be seen in the twenty-first century. Most African American girls still would choose the white doll instead of the black dolls because that image of white being the ‘only type of beauty’ has not been taken down by society.

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