

# Violence and Rejection: The Hegemony of White Culture and Its Influence on the Mother–Daughter Relationship in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*

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**Abstract:** For quite a long time, mainstream academic discourse has ignored the significance of the mother–daughter relationship and excluded it from thorough scholarly analysis. However, the theme developed the interest of twentieth-century women’s literature, and the bond between a mother and her daughter marked its presence with the emergence of motherhood studies in the 1970s. Toni Morrison – one of the finest black female writers – in her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), illustrates the complex bond between Pauline and Pecola Breedlove. Their relationship is shaped by the women’s fascination with white culture and the standards it promotes. In the novel, Morrison raises awareness of black women’s marginalisation and the way in which white culture shapes a woman’s vision of herself. The aim of this paper is to analyse the destructive influence of white hegemony on the perception of the black female self and its devastating effect on the mother–daughter relationship in *The Bluest Eye*.

**Keywords:** rejection, mother–daughter relationship, white hegemony, the black body, blackness

## Introduction

Moved to the periphery and for centuries secondary in the patriarchal reality, women often fell victim to violence, humiliation and subjectification. The patriarchal model, defined as a “sexual system of power in which the male possesses superior power and economic privilege,” had a massive impact on all spheres of their everyday life, including education, professional life and family (Eisenstein 1979, 17). Denied the right to express themselves freely, women suffered from gender inequalities and sexual and economic exploitation. One of the fundamental features of patriarchal societies is the pressure on motherhood. Becoming a child-bearer was considered a woman’s obligation and her

worth was evaluated on the basis of her fertility. As Mariana Valverde puts it, in nineteenth-century North America, white women who aspired to acquire an education or pursue a professional career were accused of committing “racial suicide,” since the theories on race that were popular at the time emphasised the superiority of white people over people of colour. Therefore, women were expected to sacrifice themselves to motherhood rather than take up a career path (Valverde, quoted in Mandell and Johnson 2017, 2).

The patriarchal and binary social structure emphasised the distinction between masculinity and femininity; the former was defined as dominant, powerful and intellectually superior, whereas the latter symbolised sexuality, subordination and inferiority. This was particularly severe for the women of colour who fell victim to slavery, violence and social exclusion. The experience of slavery that came to an end in 1865 with the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution created a specific image of the promiscuous black woman who, unlike white women, symbolised sexual looseness and immorality. As Julia Sheron Jordan-Zachery observes, white women in nineteenth-century North America were depicted in terms of the virtues of a real womanhood and embodied its characteristics (2009, 32). One of the instances Jordan-Zachery presents in her study refers to John R. Lynch’s perspective on women being classified according to their race. A former slave and a Mississippi politician, Lynch shed light on the matter of categorisation among women with different skin colour. In his view, the society had constructed a specific image of a coloured woman who, in spite of her virtues and impeccable morals, would never be perceived as a real “lady,” since such a term was reserved solely for white women (Lynch, quoted in Jordan-Zachery 2009, 32). On the other hand, black womanhood was classified as “non-woman” and “non-human” in terms of morality and sexuality (ibid., 33). Stereotypical constructions of African-American women as lustful, degenerate and morally loose prevailed in the American perception of black womanhood for many decades. Initiated during the slavery era, the pejorative image of blackness as inferior and secondary continued to function into the twentieth century.

According to Alice Walker, black womanhood is a composite of various myths and stereotypes concerning women of colour (1983, 237). Among them are multiple images of black women as *Mammy*, *Sapphire*, *Matriarch* or *Mean and Evil Bitch* (ibid.). A similar view is shared by Barbara Summers, according to whom “black women in white America have been called many things: mammy and

mule, radical and religious, sapphire and sexpot, whore and welfare queen” (2001, xiii). This biased approach created many categorisations against black women. However, subjugation and social prejudice did not solely concern adults, as girls of African descent experienced injustice and similar humiliation as well. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the destructive impact of white hegemony on the formation of black identity and racial awareness in a black girl. In order to illustrate its negative influence on a child, I will analyse Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in terms of children’s self-perception and self-loathing. The female protagonists of the novel, Pecola Breedlove and her mother Pauline, fall victim to white hegemony and the standards of white aesthetics. Their identity and self-image are shaped by these norms, which turns out to be disastrous for both of them. Moreover, I will provide a thorough analysis of the complex bond between Pecola and her mother. As regards methodology, the article refers to contemporary texts on mother–daughter relationships, specifically Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly’s *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts: Motherhood in Contemporary Women’s Literatures* (2010) and Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1995). Since the paper focusses on the matter of black bodies explored by a Polish scholar, Anna Pochmara-Ryżko, George Yancy’s perspective on the topic is included in the paper as well. To this end, the analysis is based on Yancy’s study, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America* (2017).

### Standards of beauty

The socially constructed category of beauty consists of standardised characteristics that define what is generally considered attractive and desired. Over the centuries, aesthetic canons have evolved, creating new ideals of perfection. Nevertheless, the image of beauty has often been understood in terms of skin colour, placing one tint in a primary position over the other. Stephanie M. H. Camp comes to the conclusion that

during the age of European exploration ... the sight of humans different from themselves raised questions for Europeans about the nature of human difference from other earthly creatures and from one another. (2015, 676)

This was the visual experience on which the categorisation into races was based. Facial features such as skin, hair or eye colour positioned a man on the social ladder of civilisation. The darker his skin, the lower the man's position in society.

During colonial exploration, the concept of beauty was associated with Eurocentric standards that idealised whiteness. As Margaret L. Hunter claims, "black people and blackness were defined as barbaric, savage, heathen and ugly; white people and whiteness were defined as civilised, modern, Christian and beautiful" (2005, 20). Because of the binary representation of races which was characteristic of colonial discourse, whiteness was used to carry positive connotations, whereas blackness was associated with irrationality, otherness and barbarism. The image of African slaves as being more animal than human prevailed in colonial discourse. The aim of European ideology was to reinforce the idea of white supremacy and to create a false image of the colonised. By doing so, the imperial centre justified its violence and atrocities, claiming that the native inhabitants of Africa were wild and non-human. In Edward W. Said's parlance, it constructed a false concept of the East in order to exert its power over it. By describing the Orient as mysterious and primitive, the imperial claim over the people of Africa and their lands was justified.

As mentioned before, slavery contributed greatly to the negative categorisation of people of colour, women in particular. Angela Y. Davis goes so far as to claim that "in the eyes of the slave holders, slave women were not mothers, not at all, they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force" (1983, 7). This concurs with Robert Staples' remarks in his *Exploring Black Sexuality*, where he points out that sexual promiscuity between slaves was encouraged by their white owners in order to increase the production of the labour force (2006, 18). Nevertheless, black females were sexually victimised and exploited by white slave owners who, as Staples adds, realised their deepest sexual fantasies (ibid., 19). This victimisation of black female slaves, however, was justified by the view that they were immoral and promiscuous.

In the post-slavery period, the negative representation of African-Americans still revealed itself in many fields. In her essay, "Making Racial Beauty in the United States," Stephanie M. H. Camp seems to support this line of thinking. According to Camp, in the view of white America, blackness and beauty were two contradictory categories, unable to function simultaneously (2016, 120). Carrying derogatory associations with mental and physical primitiveness, blackness has rarely been discussed in terms of aesthetics. Although black society was marginalised and subjugated in general, it was the black woman in particular

who suffered from racial and sexual exploitation. Unlike white American women, who led a life of virtue – standing by their husbands and catering for their children – black women were reduced to bodies whose main obligation was to serve the whites or provide slave labour. Since they were perceived as sinful and immoral, they developed a sense of inferiority and self-loathing. Juxtaposed against white womanhood, their images were constructed in such a way as to bring to light their secondary social status.

Standards of beauty, though, have changed over time and are still undergoing a continuous process of evolution. As Naomi Wolf, the author of *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (2002), highlights, “beauty is not universal or changeless” (2002, 12) – quite the opposite, it is pluralised, it mutates and it encompasses many beauty ideals. While a century ago it would have been socially unacceptable to perceive women of colour in terms of real beauty, in the contemporary world the myth of attractiveness has evolved and pluralised into many instances. Nowadays, it is not surprising to see models of different ethnicities on the covers of fashion magazines. Nor does it come by surprise that older models are part of various fashion campaigns. As the reality is changing constantly, “there is a bit more room today to be oneself” (ibid., 6). Regardless of one’s weight, age or skin colour, everyone has a right to express themselves without the fear of being judged.

### **In search of acceptance**

Racism and its consequences are some of the main themes Morrison elaborates on in *The Bluest Eye*. An argument that supports this view can be found in Doreatha D. Mbalia’s work, *Toni Morrison’s Developing Class Consciousness*. From Mbalia’s perspective, “the thesis of [*The Bluest Eye*] is that racism devastates the self-image of the African female in general and the African female child in particular” (2004, 32–33). Pecola, an eleven-year-old black girl, is shaped by racist stereotypes and norms of white hegemony. Because of her background, appearance and gender, the girl becomes a victim of white standards of beauty. Consequently, she experiences social elimination at the hands of other members of the community, and she blames her blackness for the hardship of her existence.

The title of the novel symbolises Pecola’s deepest desire: to have blue eyes. The child associates them with happiness and the ability to be loved and accepted, particularly by her mother. The young girl’s image of herself is based

on mainstream standards of white American popular culture, in whose view “adults, older girls, shop[s], 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 2017, 20). In the first half of the twentieth century in America, girls of colour were bombarded with images of white dolls or female stars whose pictures were seen on TV screens, billboards on the Main Streets of American cities and at the cinema. As a result, African-American girls compared themselves to white embodiments of beauty who, in public view, symbolised the desired attractiveness. In search of acceptance, black women blindly internalised the white racist mentality and developed in themselves self-loathing and an indifference to suffering.

In her oeuvre, Toni Morrison teaches us that whiteness is responsible for racial inequality in American society. Black individuals are perceived according to the judgmental white gaze that expresses contempt for coloured otherness. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison successfully demonstrates how the white gaze operates when referring to blackness. A perfect illustration of how it perceives black bodies is Pecola’s visit to Mr Yacobowski’s corner shop, where the girl goes with the intention of purchasing Mary Jane candy, since “to eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane, Love Mary Jane, Be Mary Jane” (ibid., 38). With this simple act of consumption, the girl hopes to realise her biggest dream of becoming a beautiful, white girl with blue eyes – a Mary Jane herself. Nevertheless, what Pecola meets is the hostile gaze of Yacobowski, in whose view the girl is worthless and insignificant. The white immigrant defines Pecola according to racist representations of blackness. From George Yancy’s perspective, Yacobowski constructs Pecola’s body in a distorted way, and in doing so, he “reinforces the illusion that he lives his own white identity/his body as real and stable” (ibid., 173). On the one hand, Pecola is invisible to Yacobowski, since for him “there is nothing to see” (ibid., 48). On the other hand, however, the man recognises her, as he hesitates to touch the girl’s hand in order to accept payment for the candy. In Yancy’s opinion, Yacobowski’s doubts confirm his racist attitude towards Pecola, since he “reduces her to an epidermal Blackness, something to be avoided” (ibid., 175). For him, the girl is just an object not worthy of his gaze. Instead of finding sympathy, Pecola is deprived of her humanity by the man, who shows “the total absence of human recognition” (ibid., 48–49).

Pecola’s experience with rejection and lack of understanding is similar to Ralph Ellison’s invisible man. Like the girl, Ellison’s character experiences

a sense of non-existence and perceives himself through others’ lenses. Racially constructed barriers and prejudices determine his self-worthlessness and inform his identity as an outsider. Like Pecola, the man feels invisible because

people refuse to see me .... When they approach me, they only see my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination – indeed, everything and anything except me .... That invisibility to which I refer occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact. (Ellison 1995, 7)

Since Pecola blames her blackness and dark eyes for the pain and aggression inflicted on her by others, each and every night she prays for blue eyes. She believes that the eyes have the magical power of salvation, that “if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different .... Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes” (ibid., 46). Being a tragic figure who sees herself through the white lens, Pecola tries to bleach her blackness with the intention of finally becoming beautiful. Not only is her black body condemned by the white gaze, but she is also objectified by other people of colour who internalise racist perspectives on black inferiority as their own. Since whiteness symbolises universal and desired beauty, it is also valorised by black bodies. In consequence, they measure their own worth according to white standards and recognise themselves stereotypically, as ugly and sinful. Therefore, as Pecola stands in opposition to idealised standards of beauty, she is objectified by both black and white members of the community. Her life is influenced by others’ opinions of her ugliness, which degrades the girl and deprives her of a sense of communal belonging. Although Pecola’s schoolmates and teachers are people of colour as well, Pecola alone is the object of mockery. Sitting alone at a double school desk, Pecola is almost invisible to her teachers, as “they tried never to glance at her, and called on her only when everyone was required to respond” (ibid., 45–46). The misery of her situation is confirmed by the fact that – except for Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, whom Pecola befriends – there is no-one in the girl’s social environment whom she could rely on or trust. Often laughed at and made fun of, Pecola is the embodiment of what damage and harm internalised racism can do to an innocent, black girl.

Pecola’s self-perception is based on racial stereotypes which objectify people of colour and portray them as inhuman. In many critical sources (e.g. Koo

1993), Pecola Breedlove is described as a victim of racism and false assumptions about black womanhood. Being a black female child in a society soaked with racism and sexism, Pecola experiences objectification on multiple levels (Koo 1993, 97). Her yearning to be taken care of and accepted is illustrated in Pecola's admiration for white culture. The girl's love for whiteness is confirmed in her fascination with an American child starlet who enjoyed worldwide popularity in the 1940s, Shirley Temple. Drinking milk from a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup makes Pecola's dream of being beautiful more realistic, as the child hopes that with every sip of the milk, her skin will get fairer. The girl internalises the belief in white superiority, and therefore longs for Shirley's fair skin and blue eyes. Pecola believes that through the act of mimicry, the white attributes will erase her sense of worthlessness and inferiority, transforming her into a real American beauty.

### **The mother-daughter relationship**

The motif of the mother-daughter relationship has long been excluded from mainstream academic discourse. It was Adrienne Rich who introduced the first systematic analysis of motherhood in patriarchal culture. A poet and feminist and the author of *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, Rich struggles to draw attention to the Western assumption that women are inferior to men, according to which the "man's world" is the "real world," that patriarchy is equivalent to culture and culture to patriarchy" (1995, 16). As she claims, the bond between mother and daughter is considered one of the most central and formative relationships in every woman's life, since

the cathexis between mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused – is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. (ibid., 225)

In spite of its importance, though, nineteenth-century American writers – like their European colleagues Jane Austen or the Brontës – presented the figure of a mother as absent and distant (Hirsch 1989, 10). However, in the



twentieth century, the mother’s role, as presented by Sidonie–Gabrielle Colette or Virginia Woolf, grew in significance, as it formed the daughter’s confidence and self-awareness. Moreover, with the emergence of motherhood studies in the 1970s, the mother’s voice underwent a considerable transition and became audible (Podnieks and O’Reilly 2010, 2). This period saw a growing interest in the issue of the mother–daughter relationship, especially in black female literature. According to Marianne Hirsch, the narratives of Toni Morrison or Alice Walker are good examples of the shift, as they contributed to the recovery of the bond between mother and daughter (1989, 16). Respecting their maternal heritage, Morrison and Walker – along with other female writers of colour – identified themselves with the past of their female ancestors. This concurs with what Heather Ingman observes, that living in a racist and discriminatory society, women of colour were forced to fight for the value of their lives, as “race, class and gender oppression intensify their need to uncover a strong matrilineal heritage” (28, 1999).

Toni Morrison illustrates a difficult mother–daughter bond, characterised by complexity and deviating considerably from perfection or flawlessness. In *The Bluest Eye*, the writer depicts the difficult relationship between Pecola and Pauline, which is shaped by the omnipresent cult of white culture and internalised racism among black bodies. Drenched in admiration for the beauty standards it promotes, Pecola and Pauline’s worship for whiteness exemplifies the destructive influence of white hegemony on their relationship. Believing in the myth of white superiority, the women develop in themselves a false assumption that they are worthless, and they fall victim to the canons of beauty. For instance, Pauline’s fascination with whiteness is exemplified by her obsession with American cinema. By watching films featuring white American actors, the woman escapes the hardship of her reality. Each visit to the cinema is a moment that Pauline longs for, since

the onliest time I be happy seem like was when I was in the picture show. Every time I got, I went. I’d go early, before the show started. They’d cut off the lights, and everything be black. Then the screen would light up, and I’d move right on in them pictures .... Them pictures gave me a lot of pleasure, but it made coming home hard, and looking at Cholly hard. I don’t know. (Morrison 2017, 123)

The cinema is one of the few places where Pauline finds happiness. In the darkness of the cinema, she admires the white images and indulges herself in the cinematic fiction. Captivated by the beauty of the American actresses, she dreams of becoming one of them. In consequence, the woman creates a false image of herself and mixes reality with imaginary plots. Because she associates whiteness with the opportunity to be noticed and recognised, her obsession with white American culture deepens. According to Yancy,

through a process where reality and fiction are blurred, Pecola's mother, Pauline, is caught within a world of white filmic hyperreality, which further nurtures Pecola's inability to see through the farce of whiteness. (2017, 181)

The contrast between the blackness of the cinema and the whiteness of the screen supports Richard Dyer's view on the discrimination of non-whites. In his opinion,

it is at least arguable that white society has found it hard to see non-white people as individuals; the very notion of the individual, of the freely developing, autonomous human person, is only applicable to those who are seen to be free and autonomous, who are not slaves or subject peoples. Movie lighting discriminates against non-white people because it is used in a cinema and a culture that finds it hard to recognize them as appropriate subjects for such lighting, that is, as individuals. (1997, 102)

The cinematic use of light, as Dyer notices, has a hidden purpose, namely, to exercise domination and power over the weak. Since movie lighting privileges white bodies over people of colour, the aim of the medium is to support the idea of the supremacy of whiteness. The exclusion of non-white actors from American movies confirms the biased and racist attitude of the film industry in the first half of the twentieth century. In consequence, the practice led to the assumption that people of colour were not worth visual representations on the big screen. Whereas white aesthetics was associated with order, beauty and cleanliness, the image of a black person evoked derogatory connotations. Stereotyped as dirty,

savage and irrational, black people were denied the possibility of being recognised as individuals. Therefore, white standards of behaviour were valorised and imitated by people of colour, since they equated whiteness with perfection and stability. This was also the case with Pauline, whose fascination with white standards of beauty led her to blindly imitate American actresses – Jean Harlow in particular. As Gary Schwartz interprets it,

Pauline, as the viewer and learner, has absorbed the visions of light and darkness and becomes the engine of their reproduction. ... Wittingly or otherwise, Pauline not only becomes the Imitation but, in turn, imitates it. She is an imitation of an imitation. (1997, 123)

Pauline’s admiration for whiteness is also expressed in the way she idealises the Fisher family. Working as a Mammy, she becomes a devoted servant and fits the categorisation of black womanhood perfectly. The image of the Mammy, as stated above, was one of the stereotypical and cultural representations of women of colour in the United States. In the view of Julian Sheron Jordan-Zachery, the author of *Black Women, Cultural Images, and Social Policy*, the portrait of the Mammy that prevailed in the literature of the nineteenth century depicted her in terms of loyalty and servitude (2009, 38). Her value was based on the role she played in a white American family. Taking care of white children, the Mammy was perceived as a “passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them” (hooks 1981, 85). However, the positive image of a loving, tender and affectionate Mammy was limited to her relationship with the white family she worked for. As regards the bond with her own children, the Mammy failed to be a good and supportive parent.

Morrison’s character, Pauline Breedlove, embodies the servile Mammy, as her main devotion is work and caring for the little Fisher girl. Nicknamed Polly, she becomes “an ideal servant, for such a role filled practically all her needs” (Morrison 2017, 100). In the Fishers’ house, Pauline finds happiness and a sense of stability. Working for a white American family makes her disregard her blackness and internalise the racist beliefs about people of colour. Surrounded by white porcelain and impeccably clean floors and furniture, she momentarily forgets about her African background and distances herself from her family, Pecola in particular. An incident that explicitly illustrates Pauline’s hostility

towards her daughter takes place in the Fishers' mansion. Pecola accidentally spills blueberries in the kitchen of her mother's employers, and is punished by Pauline. The woman is infuriated:

Mrs. Breedlove yanked [Pecola] up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you . . . work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. (*ibid.*, 108–109)

When the floor gets dirty, the woman loses control and pours out all her anger and irritation on Pecola. As the cleanliness symbolises perfection and her obsession with whiteness, the dirtiness of the floor stands for the blackness and inferiority Pauline associates herself with. Calling Pecola "a crazy fool" and punishing her physically, Pauline confirms her devotion to the Fishers and the household duties she is obliged to perform. The tragedy of the situation lies in Pauline's attitude towards Pecola. Showing no motherly feelings for the girl, Pauline is more concerned with the messy kitchen floor and the Fisher girl's dirty dress: "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (*ibid.*, 109).

The passages quoted above openly show Pauline's distinction between black and white bodies, treating the former disrespectfully. While the white body is associated with being loved, valued and cared for, its black counterpart receives nothing but insult and is physically and mentally victimised. According to Vanessa D. Dickerson, "while the narrative represents Pecola's body as the real, embraceable body and the Fisher girl's as the specterised and distant body, Pecola's is socially assaulted, the Fisher's girl's held dear" (quoted in Yancy 2017, 183–184). The reason for this binary representation originates from a common belief about whiteness and its privileged position. Therefore, as a black girl, Pecola receives no recognition or attention from her mother. Instead, Pauline's motherly feelings of comfort and tenderness belong to the white Fisher girl. Consequently, Pecola becomes a victim of Pauline's obsession with whiteness and, as Dickerson states, Pecola "is one example of the black child whose need for his or her mother is sacrificed to the white child's pleasure or comfort in a mammy" (*ibid.*, 183).

According to Hirsch, to know the mother “we would have to *begin* with” her story (1989, 5). Therefore, in order to analyse the bond between Pauline and Pecola, it is crucial to bring to light Pauline’s difficult past, her traumatic childhood. As a young girl, Pauline did not receive parental love or affection. Socially denied and condemned to isolation because of her deformed foot, the girl experienced rejection from her early years. As a result of her disability and other people’s indifference towards her, young Pauline developed a feeling of separateness:

There were no funny jokes and anecdotes about funny things she had done; why no one ever remarked on her food preferences – no saving of the wing or neck for her – no cooking of the peas in a separate pot without rice because she did not like rice; why nobody teased her; why she never felt at Home anywhere, or that she belonged any place. (Morrison 2017, 110–111)

Pauline’s childhood experience of isolation and rejection left a deep mark on her psyche and shaped her self-perception. Abandoned on a daily basis and denied parental care in her childhood, Pauline becomes devoid of any maternal instincts for Pecola later in her life. Instead, “into her daughter she beat fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (ibid., 128). Since Pecola is a reminder of Pauline’s own ugliness, the woman distances herself from her daughter. Moreover, the rejection Pecola receives from her mother originates from the Breedloves’ conviction of their ugliness and worthlessness:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. (ibid., 38–39)

The belief in their repulsiveness has a negative impact on Pecola, since the girl understands what beauty is according to her parents’ perspective. As the Breedloves’ existence revolves around their race and poverty, they are unable to endow the girl with care or parental love. Instead, as Paul Douglas Mahaffey puts it, “when [Pecola] turns to her parents in order to establish a positive link between childhood and adulthood, she only finds an overwhelming source of racial self-hatred” (2004, 158). Nevertheless, it is the relationship between

Pecola and her mother that considerably shapes the girl's vision of herself. Since Pecola's birth, the woman's attitude towards her has been characterised by repulsion and contempt. Pauline and her blind fascination with whiteness leads the woman to construct her own idea of beauty. The conviction that white bodies are superior to black ones distorts Pauline's vision of herself and Pecola. Pauline perceives the girl as hideous, since her "head was full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (Morrison 2017, 126). Unlike blackness, whiteness is considered a signifier of impeccability and purity. According to George Yancy, it is "the product of a generative context of white hegemony" (2017, 188). Its power creates the image of whiteness as pure and desirable. Black bodies, on the other hand, evoke pejorative and derogatory connotations. Their representation as evil, sinful and dirty develops mutual aversion among people of colour. Consequently, the stereotypical illustration of blackness and a lack of self-awareness in black bodies demonstrate the destructive powers of white hegemony.

Although Pecola is still a child, she is aware of the source of her rejection. The blue eyes Pecola longs for so desperately symbolise her desire for acceptance and change. Constantly reminded of her otherness and ignored by her relatives and the local people of Lorain, Pecola's only hope lies in the magical power of blue eyes. According to white aesthetic standards, as George Yancy notices, blue eyes "constitute a metonymy for white hegemony" (*ibid.*, 181). Since Pecola's blackness does not meet the standards of universal white beauty, the girl sees herself through the distorted eyes of those who believe in racist stereotyping and regard whiteness as superior. Naively, the girl drinks milk from a Shirley Temple cup and eats Mary Jane candies with the hope of becoming white, pure and finally accepted. This act of cannibalism symbolises how strong Pecola's desire for visual change is. With every sip of milk, with each bite of Mary Jane candies, the girl hopes for a visual metamorphosis which will turn her into a white, impeccable beauty. Nevertheless, Pecola's dreams are not realised and all she receives from her mother and the community is rejection and a sense of being invisible.

The bond between Pauline and Pecola mirrors the destructive impact of white hegemony on the mother-daughter relationship. In Eunsook Koo's opinion, "the cruelty and hate expressed in Mrs. Breedlove's physical violence towards her daughter suggests the total estrangement between mother and daughter" (1993, 115). This estrangement, together with the disgust and hostility from the hands of others, leads Pecola to insanity and makes her life tragic:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendrils, sap-green days, 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 – could not even see – but which filled the valleys of the mind. (Morrison 2017, 204)

The comparison to a bird unable to fly symbolises Pecola’s great desire to escape the hardship of her existence. The girl would like to float away in the sky like a winged creature, and leave all the traumatic memories behind. Her madness, though, prevents Pecola realising her dreams, as she gets lost in her craziness and is “somewhere in that little brown house she and her mother moved to on the edge of town, where you can see her even now, once in a while” (ibid., 205).

## Conclusions

In order to understand blackness, one needs to confront it with white constructions of the black body. Following Frantz Fanon’s way of thinking, blackness can be recognised only in relation to whiteness, since “not only must the black man [woman] be black; he [she] must be black in relation to the white man [woman]” (1967, 110). Therefore, whiteness has often been perceived as a category that signifies power, absolute truth and universalism. It has frequently been a point of reference when evaluating an individual, a non-white person in particular. W. E. B. Du Bois, the author of the pivotal work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), presents a similar approach to the matter of blackness. In his seminal piece of writing, Du Bois reveals derogatory constructions of the black body, which is understood as different, inferior and problematic. From his perspective, black people undergo the process of “double consciousness” defined as

a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals

in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903, 45)

Regarding Pecola Breedlove, the girl also undergoes the process of “double consciousness,” measuring her own worth by the way others perceive her. As mentioned before, her situation exemplifies how whiteness and the conviction of its superiority influence the self-esteem of the black body. Since Pecola internalises the myths of black inferiority and worthlessness, her desire is to possess blue eyes, which – in her view – will save her from despair. Nevertheless, her search for acceptance and maternal love leads the girl to delusional insanity and the conviction that the blue eyes she desires are finally in her possession. The bluest eyes, however, do not liberate her from the wretchedness and misery of her existence. On the contrary, the girl becomes the saddest, the “bluest” version of herself, unable to find consolation or happiness. Morrison’s use of a pun in the title of the novel emphasises Pecola’s dramatic condition in a society permeated with racism and intolerance of otherness. Similarly to Ralph Ellison’s invisible man, Pecola strives to regain the human dimension of her existence. Nevertheless, unlike Ellison’s character, the girl fails, since she is victimised by the white gaze. The paradox of her situation lies in the fact that in spite of her invisibility, she is seen by others as an embodiment of worthless blackness. Her recognition is limited only to instances when the girl falls victim to the community’s humiliation and mockery. Unlike the white Fisher girl, who, as a specterised body, symbolises civilisation and impeccability, Pecola’s body is tangible and perceived as dirty, polluted and thus doomed to failure. In this particular example, among many others in *The Bluest Eye*, it is evident how the myth of whiteness was constructed and how it functioned in the America of the 1940s, resulting in the distorted and biased perception of people of colour and internalised racism among them.

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