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# Unveiling the Layers of Societal Oppression: A Critical Analysis of Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye"

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## Abstract

Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye" intricately delves into the intersections of race, gender, identity, and beauty within the African American community. By following characters such as Pecola Breedlove, Pauline Breedlove, and Cholly Breedlove, Morrison skillfully navigates the intricate web of societal norms and their profound influence on individual psyche and community dynamics. This research article offers a thorough analysis of Morrison's examination of internalized racism, sexism, and the pursuit of self-definition amid oppressive societal standards.

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## Introduction

"The Bluest Eye" is a novel written by African American author Toni Morrison. Published in 1970, it marked Morrison's debut as a novelist. She achieved significant recognition, winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Before embarking on her writing career, Morrison taught English in Houston and at Howard University. Her journey as a writer began after she divorced her husband. Initially, she worked as an editor in Syracuse before relocating to New York, where she served as a senior editor. While teaching at Howard University, Morrison began crafting fiction. The idea for her first novel, "The Bluest Eye," emerged during this time. It tells the story of a young black girl who longs to have blue eyes. Morrison's other

notable works include "Sula" (1973), "Song of Solomon" (1977), "Tar Baby" (1981), "Beloved" (1987), "Jazz" (1992), "Paradise" (1997), "Love" (2003), "A Mercy" (2008), "Home" (2012), and her latest novel, "God Help The Child," released in April 2015. Morrison drew inspiration from her own life experiences, particularly her parents' migration to Ohio to escape racism in the South. Her novels often explore themes related to the experiences of black individuals, echoing the focus of "The Bluest Eye"

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" is an indelible masterpiece of American literature, celebrated for its profound exploration of systemic racism and internalized oppression within the African American community. Set against the backdrop of 1940s Ohio, Morrison weaves a rich tapestry of characters grappling with the complexities of identity, self-worth, and societal expectations. Central to the narrative is Pecola Breedlove, a young Black girl whose fervent desire for blue eyes symbolizes her longing for acceptance and beauty in a world that privileges whiteness. Through Pecola's poignant journey and the parallel experiences of characters like Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, Morrison peels back the layers of societal inequity to reveal the deep-seated trauma and psychological toll inflicted upon marginalized individuals.

As readers delve into the lives of these characters, they encounter the harsh truths of racial prejudice and the unyielding quest for validation in a society that systematically diminishes the worth of Black lives. Morrison's eloquent prose and insightful observations encourage readers to examine their own role in upholding oppressive structures, urging them to confront uncomfortable realities about race, identity, and the destructive influence of beauty ideals. By shedding light on the intricate nuances of human existence, "The Bluest Eye" serves as an enduring testament to Morrison's exceptional skill and steadfast dedication to social equity

As Claudia Tate suggests, "Black women writers primarily write for themselves, using their craft as a tool to unearth deeply buried truths about themselves and the world around them" (qtd.in Davidson 70).

Morrison's body of work delves into the experiences and roles of Black American women within a racist and unjust society, illuminating their quest for cultural identity. She underscores the betrayal experienced by black women amidst racial, gender, and class conflicts. As noted by Henry Louis Gates Jr., her major themes revolve around "the burden of history, and the profound social impacts of race, gender, and class" (ix). Amidst her intricate and nuanced narratives, Morrison also integrates the distinctive cultural heritage of Afro-Americans

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" solidifies her position as a prominent figure among Afro-American writers. Employing her discerning perspective, she exposes the societal evils perpetuated by racial divisions between blacks and whites. In an interview with Milwaukee Journal staff writer Fannie Leflore, Morrison acknowledges that she directly confronts and critiques the destructive racial imagery within "The Bluest Eye"

## Unveiling the Multifaceted Struggles of Black Identity in 'The Bluest Eye'

In Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," the character of Pecola Breedlove emerges as a profound symbol of the corrosive impact of societal beauty standards on Black individuals. Pecola's relentless desire for blue eyes encapsulates the deeply

ingrained belief that whiteness represents the epitome of beauty and desirability. Through Pecola's journey, Morrison delves into the complex interplay between internalized racism, self-worth, and societal rejection. Morrison employs various literary techniques to illustrate Pecola's internal struggle and the external forces that contribute to her unraveling psyche.

Toni Morrison's decision to commence the novel with the revelation that "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941" (Bluest 3) serves as a symbolic gateway into the exploration of emotional desolation and the psychological damage inflicted by societal and cultural forces. The absence of marigolds, typically associated with vibrancy and life, alludes to the barren emotional landscape in which the characters exist, devoid of the necessary emotional strength and support critical for human flourishing.

Symbolism, notably embodied in Pecola's fixation on blue eyes, serves as a potent metaphor for the erasure of Black identity and the internalization of white supremacist ideals. Pecola's yearning for blue eyes reflects not only a desire for physical transformation but also a quest for validation and acceptance within a society that systematically marginalizes Blackness. Furthermore, Morrison meticulously crafts Pecola's character development to reveal the devastating consequences of societal rejection and internalized self-loathing. Pecola's descent into madness is depicted with haunting clarity, underscoring the profound psychological toll of navigating a world that denies her humanity based on her race.

Morrison intricately explores the intersection of race, gender, and beauty, illuminating the ways in which these intersecting forces shape individual identity and societal perceptions. Through Pecola's story, Morrison offers a searing critique of systemic racism and the enduring legacy of white supremacy. Pecola becomes a tragic figure, emblematic of the countless Black individuals who have been conditioned to internalize harmful beauty standards that perpetuate cycles of self-doubt and inadequacy.

Morrison's portrayal of Pecola's plight compels readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the pervasiveness of racial bias and the urgent need for societal transformation. Ultimately, Pecola's narrative serves as a powerful indictment of a society that systematically devalues Blackness while upholding whiteness as the standard of beauty and worth. Moreover, Morrison vividly illustrates the destructive power of these societal ideals through her depiction of the black characters' belief in their own ugliness, which is not portrayed as something inherent or tangible but as an imposed condition.

... they believed themselves to be unattractive... But their lack of beauty was distinctive.... You observed them and pondered why they appeared so unattractive; you scrutinized closely but couldn't pinpoint the origin. Then it dawned on you that it stemmed from their conviction, their deep-seated belief. It was as if some enigmatic, all-knowing authority had bestowed upon each of them a cloak of ugliness to don, and they had all accepted it unquestioningly. The authority had declared, "You are unattractive." They had surveyed their surroundings and found nothing to refute the assertion; indeed, they perceived reinforcement for it emanating from every billboard, every film, every gaze. "Yes," they acknowledged. "You are correct." And they embraced the unattractiveness, draped it over themselves like a shroud, and ventured forth into the world (Bluest 36-37)

Morrison challenges readers to interrogate their own complicity in perpetuating oppressive beauty norms and to actively work towards dismantling systems of inequality. In doing so, "The Bluest Eye" becomes not only a literary masterpiece but

also a call to action for social justice and collective healing.

In "The Bluest Eye," Pauline Breedlove emerges as a complex character whose adherence to white beauty standards deeply influences her daughter Pecola's perception of self. Pauline's internalized self-hatred is palpable throughout the narrative, as she grapples with her own insecurities and feelings of inferiority. Her relentless pursuit of an unattainable ideal of beauty reflects the pervasive influence of societal norms on individual identity. Morrison skillfully explores the nuanced dynamics of motherhood, revealing Pauline's deep-seated desire for validation and acceptance. Pauline's own struggles with self-worth are projected onto Pecola, as she inadvertently reinforces damaging beauty norms within her own family. Through Pauline's character, Morrison delves into the complexities of intergenerational trauma and the ways in which systemic oppression permeates familial relationships.

Pauline's adherence to white beauty standards serves as a poignant commentary on the ways in which internalized racism manifests within marginalized communities. Her relentless pursuit of physical transformation mirrors the broader societal pressures that dictate worth based on Eurocentric ideals of beauty. Morrison's portrayal of Pauline highlights the insidious nature of internalized oppression and its profound impact on individual psyche and familial dynamics. Ultimately, Pauline's character serves as a sobering reminder of the ways in which societal expectations can perpetuate cycles of self-doubt and inadequacy within marginalized communities. Through her narrative, Morrison challenges readers to confront the damaging effects of internalized racism and to work towards fostering environments of self-acceptance and empowerment.

Pauline's story stands as a testament to the enduring struggle for identity and belonging in a society rife with prejudice and inequality. In "The Bluest Eye," Cholly Breedlove emerges as a tragic figure whose life is marked by a series of traumatic experiences and profound emotional turmoil. Morrison delves into Cholly's backstory, revealing the abandonment and rejection he faced from a young age. These early experiences of trauma leave an indelible mark on Cholly's psyche, shaping his worldview and interpersonal relationships. Cholly's descent into alcoholism and violence serves as a coping mechanism for the deep-seated pain and emotional turmoil he carries.

Morrison paints a poignant portrait of a man grappling with his own sense of worthlessness and alienation in a society that offers little solace or support. Cholly's struggles with addiction and aggression reflect the broader systemic injustices faced by African Americans, highlighting the cyclical nature of trauma and oppression. Despite his flaws and destructive behavior, Cholly exhibits moments of resilience and humanity throughout the narrative. Morrison portrays Cholly as a complex character capable of moments of tenderness and introspection amid his tumultuous existence. Cholly's narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience inherent within the African American community, even in the face of overwhelming adversity. Through Cholly's story, Morrison challenges readers to confront the pervasive impact of systemic racism and societal neglect on individual lives. Cholly's struggles are emblematic of the broader experiences of African Americans navigating a world marked by prejudice and discrimination. Ultimately, Cholly emerges as a symbol of resilience and survival, underscoring the enduring strength of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

In "The Bluest Eye," Soaphead Church represents a troubling manifestation of the exploitation and manipulation that can occur within marginalized communities. Morrison paints Soaphead as a character who wields power and influence within

his community, using his position to prey upon vulnerable individuals like Pecola. Through his actions, Soaphead perpetuates harmful beauty norms and exacerbates the psychological distress of those around him. Soaphead's distorted understanding of love is particularly troubling, as he views his exploitation of Pecola as a misguided act of affection. Morrison highlights the ways in which individuals in positions of power may exploit others under the guise of benevolence, further perpetuating cycles of harm and oppression.

Morrison's depiction of Soaphead serves as a critique of how internalized oppression can manifest within marginalized communities. Soaphead's behavior mirrors a larger trend of exploitation and manipulation resulting from individuals internalizing harmful societal norms and ideals. By portraying Soaphead in this light, Morrison urges readers to confront uncomfortable realities regarding power dynamics and exploitation within communities already burdened by systemic oppression. His character serves as a warning, illustrating the repercussions of unchecked power and its potential to perpetuate harm within marginalized communities.

In "The Bluest Eye," Toni Morrison delves into the complex interplay between race, gender, and identity, showcasing how these intersecting dynamics shape the experiences of Black women within a society marked by systemic oppression. Through characters like Pecola and Pauline Breedlove, Morrison unveils the intricate ways in which beauty standards intersect with gendered expectations, exacerbating the challenges faced by Black women. Pecola's longing for blue eyes epitomizes the intersectionality of race and gender, as she internalizes society's belief that whiteness equates to beauty and worth. Morrison uses Pecola's character to illustrate how these intersecting oppressions manifest in the lives of Black girls, leading to internalized self-hatred and a distorted sense of identity. Similarly, Pauline Breedlove's adherence to white beauty standards further underscores the intersectionality of race and gender. Pauline's own internalized oppression drives her to perpetuate these standards within her family, inadvertently reinforcing the marginalization of Black women and girls.

Through these characters, Morrison exposes the insidious ways in which race, gender, and identity intersect to shape the lived experiences of Black women. By illuminating these complexities, Morrison challenges readers to confront the entrenched systems of power and control that perpetuate oppression within society.

## Conclusion

C. S. Lewis famously remarked, "Literature adds to reality; it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become" (Brainy Quote).

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" emerges as a potent critique of societal norms and their harmful effects on both individual psychology and community dynamics. Through the journeys of characters like Pecola, Pauline, Cholly, and Soaphead, Morrison exposes the layers of internalized racism, sexism, and oppression deeply entrenched within the African American community. By delving into the intersections of race, gender, and identity, Morrison offers a profound examination of the intricacies of self-definition and resilience in the face of systemic injustice. Ultimately, "The Bluest Eye"

stands as a poignant reminder of the enduring legacy of societal oppression and underscores the urgent necessity for collective action towards liberation and empowerment.

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