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Literary Analysis Rough Draft

Unlike many works of African American literature that deal directly with the aftermath of slavery and the years of deeply-embedded racism that followed, the storyline of Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, does not engage directly with such events. The story takes place in the 1940s in Lorain, Ohio, and tells the tragedy of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old black girl marginalized by her community and the larger society. Collectively, Pecola and her dysfunctional family are marked outside of what is acceptable. Thus, they are viewed as a wretched disgrace to the world. In Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison reveals the effects of the white's beauty standards that lead to the black community's self-hatred and belief in their ugliness.

Throughout the novel, whiteness is used as a standard of beauty. The prominent aggression of the white culture subjects black culture to fall victim to the white cultural hegemony, leading to the black community's self-hatred. With the powerful influence of white mass media, the standard of beauty is that whiteness, and its characteristics are deemed beautiful, and blackness and its features are ugly. "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." (20) The internalization of white beauty ideals for African American girls is represented here with the white dolls given to young African American girls,

promoting the belief that whiteness is desired. Psychologically, the tormenting and unrelenting sense of inferiority plagued the young, impressionable black girls' minds. Consequently, whiteness stood as a symbol of purity, beauty, and cleanliness for the black community. Therefore they grew to despise their appearance, which they could not control; nevertheless, they wished, desperately, hauntingly to change it.

The standards of the ideal white beauty have run through generations of black families as adult women, having learned to hate the blackness of their bodies, take this hatred out on their children. Mrs. Breedlove shares this conviction, boldly stating, "But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly." (126) The Breedlove family felt that what society defined as beautiful was never an achievable goal and thus let themselves succumb to the label of ugliness. They never sought to rise above it and consequently raised their children in the same manner, instilling them with the feeling of self-disgust and inadequacy. Neglected, Pecola was subject to self-contempt because she did not fit the ideals of society nor her parents. She began to fantasize about the pretty blue-eyed girl whom the world would adore; and to whom she would become.

Morrison depicts the tragic account of imposing white ideals of beauty in the developing female character Pecola Breedlove, a girl who yearns for acceptance. Therefore, Pecola, "Each night, without fail, [she] prayed for blue eyes." (46) To Pecola, blue eyes were a symbol of the beauty, happiness, and security white people relished in. However, this belief leads to an unhealthy obsession causing her to lose her sanity as her wish for blue eyes is "granted." Pecola's attainment of blue eyes at the expense of her sanity only provokes the community to see her in a more pernicious way. For this reason, the blue eyes could also symbolize the sad realities of

racial self-hatred stemming from an obsession with white beauty. Pecola's new view of the world through her blue eyes wrote a new narrative about her life, but it only reinforces her isolation from the world. Her new friendship is imagined, and her eyes once thought to bring her security and comfort only induced the need for constant reassurance, as she developed the fear that someone could have eyes bluer than hers.

The white standard of beauty also divided the black community, establishing internalized racism within the community. Throughout the novel, black children have been taught to revere whatever is white, or even white-ish, that they are blindly in awe of a black girl, Maureen Peal, who is half white. Maureen had dark green eyes, not blue, but still superior to those with brown eyes; she had lighter skin that was prized and envied by those darker than her. In an argument with Claudia, Maureen shouts, "I am cute! And you ugly!" (73) Asserting her dominance with her lighter complexion and internalized racism towards her community. Maureen is considered beautiful because of the characteristics she possesses that are prominent amongst white people; fair skin, long hair, and green eyes. Even with the little whiteness she holds, her beauty and rank are above Claudia, Freida, and Pecola, and they see its power nonetheless. Additionally, we see internalized racism from Geraldine, a middle-class black woman who keeps the house clean and diligently but obsessively cares for the physical appearances of herself and her family. Geraldine goes on to explain to her son, "the difference between colored people and n-----s. They were easily identifiable. Colored people were neat and quiet; n-----s were dirty and loud." (87) Geraldine's prejudice stems from behavior rather than skin color as she believes the white children will not want to play with her son if he acts like a lower-class black person. Even though Geraldine and her family are black, she considers them to be above their race because they are

more well-kept than others in their community. In Geraldine's view, her outward appearance and mannerisms bring her as close to the envied white lifestyle she longs to obtain. But it only serves to expose her protruding internalized self-hatred.

In its entirety, *The Bluest Eye* accurately depicts the struggles of establishing an identity under the burden of the dominant and racist white culture. Morrison unearths the negative impact of the culturally-imposed ideas of white beauty, cleanliness, and sanitation to the point where the black community disengages with themselves and subconsciously acts out their feelings of self-loathing onto other members of their community. Morrison's novel provides essential insight into the psychological damage of racism and the perception of beauty, effectively critiquing society and its sickening standards of beauty towards black people.